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OR,

The Lucky Pards of Goodenough.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,

AUTHOR OF "OLD DISMAL, THE RANGE TRAMP,"
"HUSTLER HARRY," "CAPTAIN NAME-
LESS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BIG FIST MOSE AND SOCORRO JIM.

GOODENOUGH, New Mexico, was a typical Southwestern mining-camp of dirty canvas tents and hastily constructed slab shanties and saloons. Of course the denizens of the place called it a city and were quite confident it was destined to become the metropolis of the Territory. But, Goodenough was one of those mushroom towns built near placer diggings, and when the placer petered out, the tents and slab shanties seemed to melt away and vanish like a morning mist before the full glare of the sun. But the reader is introduced to Goodenough in its palmy days when, as Old Socorro Jim afterward expressed it, "things wuz b'ilin'."

Sunday was a great day in Goodenough. The rough and tough denizens of the place did their

"THER COWBOYS!" SHRIEKED APACHE NAN AGAIN, AS THE HORSE THUNDERED ON DOWN THE STREET. "THEY'RE ON A HOLY TEAR!"

"worshipping" at the bars and gambling-tables of the town, and the keepers of the saloons did a big business. Once every seven days as regularly as the Sabbath came round there was a gala day in the hustling little camp. The miner threw aside the pick and shovel and mingled with the strange throng in town, where the cowboy, the speculator, the adventurer, the horny-handed laborer and the soft white-fingered gambler jostled shoulder to shoulder with the dark-faced Mexican, the Indian, the sullen-browed ruffian and cut-throat, and the criminal who had fled from "the States" to the wild land of the Southwest, where he could hide for a time beyond the relentless reach of stern Justice's iron hand.

"The Wanderer's Home" was one of the most popular saloons in Goodenough. It was a huge slab affair with a canvas top, which covering served to admit light and protect those within the place from the sun and rain.

Jerry Blake, familiarly known as "Uncle Jerry," was the proprietor of the Wanderer's Home, and certain it was that he knew how to conduct such a place in a successful manner. Of course Uncle Jerry made some enemies, but his foes usually considered it a very safe thing to let him alone, for he was called a bad man with a gun.

If the reader had strayed into the Wanderer's Home on a certain Sabbath day he would have witnessed a strange scene—a scene to be found nowhere save in the wildest part of the Wild Southwest. From the street one entered a bar-room where the sawdust that had been strewn over the bare ground had been trodden into the dirt by hundreds of feet till it was very near the color of the dirt itself. The room was filled with the same motley crowd seen on the street, miners, toughs and the outcasts of many nations, including of course the renegade red-skin and the cueless Chinaman.

The sound of many voices was confusing, and mingled with the coarse oath and jest could be heard the clinking of glasses as the sweating barkeepers set out the "liquid refreshments" for the thirsty throng crowding up to the bar beneath the spot where a dozen bullets had left as many round holes in the canvas covering which served as a roof.

The further end of the room was partitioned off from an apartment that was evidently a dance hall, for the enlivening strains of a violin mingled with the steady shuffle of feet and the sing-song calls of the prompter floated through the canvas-curtained opening which served as a door.

Midway down the bar-room the deal tables began and extended quite to the dance hall partition, an irregular lane through the midst of the tables enabling the frequenters of the saloon to pass from the bar to the dance room. There was scarcely one deserted table, nearly all being used by the deft-fingered gamblers and the foolish "pigeons" they were plucking. A faro layout was doing a big business.

At one of the tables sat two men who were not playing cards and who contrasted so strangely in appearance that they were favored by many curious or amused glances even in that motley gathering. One was a little hump-backed old fellow whose nose resembled the beak of a hawk. His eyes were small and keen, but a jovial light twinkled in their depths once in a while, showing the man's soul was not nearly so badly deformed as his body. He was dressed in soiled and well-worn buckskin garments, and the cartridge belt around his waist held some very fine weapons.

In fact, the beardless little hunchback was Old Socorro Jim, a character widely known on the Southwest border, having a reputation widespread as a reliable guide and a desperate Indian-fighter.

Opposite Socorro Jim sat a man who stood at least six feet four in his moccasins and was built "from the ground up" according to his height. A massive giant of bone and muscle he seemed, a man whom it would be "healthy" to give a wide berth. He was dressed in clay-bedaubed garments such as are worn by miners.

The giant's face was not unpleasant to look upon, although there was a ruddy tint to his nose, plainly showing he had exposed himself somewhat carelessly to "liquid sunburn." A good part of his features were covered by a curly straw-colored beard. His eyes were blue, but, like his nose, showed the effect of too frequent indulgence in the glass that inebriates.

A single heavy revolver was suspended in a leather case on the big man's right hip, showing he cared little for a display of weapons. Judging by the enormous size of one clinched hand which lay upon the table before him, he would not need use a more deadly weapon upon a person unfortunate enough to feel the weight of his huge fist driven by the giant's muscular arm.

The Goliath was speaking:

"By me soul!" he laughed, the words being uttered in an odd, affected manner, "I can skeerce believe me ears. Is it possible that such a little withered-up old runt as you are is the jinuwine Socorro Jim, the skelper of the wild and untamed red-man of this yere galorous

land of hustle and howl? In the words of the illustrious and late lamented William Spake-speare, or some other galoot: 'May I be jiggered!'"

"Socorro Jim's my handle," replied the little man, sharply, his small eyes snapping a bit angrily and his squeaky voice rising above the pitch of ordinary conversation. "You asked me fer it, an' I guv ye straight goods. Now, who might you be, you big, overgrown tramp?"

The giant look amazed, then laughed again in a good-natured way, as he answered:

"I'm a mighty chief from All Over, Jimmy, but I'm not on the fight just now, so don't get up on yer ear. I do not doubt yer word, pard; of course you're Socorro Jim. But by his reputation I alwus supposed ther great Injun-fighter and side partner of the famous Old Bill Williams must be somewhat larger than yours truly; so, quite naturally, I am surprised. At the same time, I am proud to know ye, James; behold I would clasp your paw!"

But the little man drew back, slowly shaking his head, his eyes fastened distrustfully on the huge hand which the "Chief from All Over" thrust across the table.

"I don't care ter fall inter thet b'ar-trap," he admitted, grinning a little. "'Sides thet, you hain't tole me yer handle yit."

"Most noble James, your pardon I beseech. My thoughtlessness is to be condemned. In the many lands through which I have wandered I have been known by various titles, but the last to fall on me and stick is Big Fist Mose. By that beautiful cognomen, Jimmy, to you I would be known."

"That's good enough, I'll allow, fer it does fit ye to a capital T."

"Yes," continued the giant, "I am Big Fist Mose, the Chief from All Over. I'm often spoken of as a terror on trucks when I get on the rampage. I ambled into this peaceful little town, dear James, in search for fun and new kingdoms to conquer. I shall have to h'ist on sevarial sniffers before I get steam up, but then I shall undoubtedly waltz out and take the town. When I get started, I thirst for gore. Ha! methinks thou growest pale. In the words of the immortal William: 'A fearful eye thou hast; where is the blood that I have seen inhabit in those cheeks?'"

"What are you tryin' to git through ye, anyhow?" demanded the little scout, puzzled by the strange manner and words of the giant. "You don't want ter try ter poke fun at me, fer I'm chain-lightnin' on ther shoot, an' ez lief salt ye ez not, if I once break loose."

"Calm thy nerves, Jimmy darling; I mean no offense. It is plain you are not an ardent lover of the great Bard of Avon, like myself. But, to return to the subject: who is the boasted cock-of-the-walk in this yere camp of Goodenough?"

"Waal, Rube ther Crusher is generally acknowledged ther chief o' ther town."

"Then Reuben is my mutton. I alwus go for first chop. Will you kindly point out the gent for me?"

"With pleasure, an' ef you kin lick him, I'll shout for Big Fist Mose till my throat is sore. He hain't in the room at present, but he's sure ter drap round sevarial times durin' ther day ter load up an' pick a fuss if he kin."

"Then right here I stay, most noble sir, till Reuben shows up. Then I shall proceed to place a foot on his coat-tail and utter a couple or three yoops in his ear. Then, James of the coal-black eye, you will see the fur fly. Never yet have I met but one man who could curry the burrs out of my wool."

"Only one?" came sarcastically from Socorro Jim's lips. "An' who wuz thet?"

"He was a holy howler from Tornado Bar, you hear me! I struck him over in Santa Fe. Called himself Colonel Cool, and, James, my boy, he was the coolest cucumber I ever attempted to chew up. He was not over five feet ten, and I counted on an easy job; but oh, ye immortal gods! you should have seen that decoction of chain-lightning with muscles of steel and cast-iron fists knock the packing out of me! He did it in just three holy shakes, and did not even remove his jacket while he was attending to the job. The last paralyzer he gave me sent me into the corner fast asleep, an' when I came round, I found he had paid for all the bug-juice I could drink during the next three days. After that I no longer posed as the chief of Santa Fe, and Colonel Cool was ther boss of that town."

"A remarkable cuss he must have been," laughed Jim.

"Correct you are, dear friend," nodded the would-be chief of Goodenough, pretending he did not detect the sarcasm in the little man's voice. "He was remarkable in more ways than one. As I before remarked, he was the coolest cucumber I ever struck. It was shortly after Colonel Cool wound up my worsted thet another hard boy struck the town. Of course he heard of the colonel and hunted him up at once with blood in his eyes. They met in Bob Duffee's saloon and the stranger introduced himself as a bad man from the wilderness and said he was about to pulverize the colonel. Then he drew off and struck at the colonel's nose, but in some peculiar way he ran against the cool man's fist and fell

down so hard he must have been dazed, for he did not stir for a few minutes.

"Jimmy, it was a sight for sore eyes to see Colonel Cool walk away to the bar without once looking at the bad man from ther wilderness. He didn't seem to pay any more 'tention to the galoot he had just knocked down than he would to a dog he had kicked out of his path. But, as he leaned on the bar with his back to the bad man, his right hand thrust under his coat-tail while he calmly sipped a glass of Duffee's best mountain dew, he was watching the galoot by means of a mirror behind the bar. In that he could see every act of the man he had hit with his cast-iron knuckles.

"As soon as the bad man got the bee out of his bonnet, he sat up, yanking out a revolver and looking around for the colonel. He saw Cool leaning on the bar, apparently regardless of everything behind him, and so the treacherous whelp threw up the revolver, meaning to shoot the colonel in the back. I saw the act and reached for a gun, at the same time yelling for the colonel to look sharp. But, he did not need any of my aid. Just as the galoot on the floor was getting a dead drop, a puff of smoke shot out from beneath the colonel's coat-tail and the report of a revolver rung through the room. The bad man gave a yell and dropped his revolver as if it was red-hot, for as true as I live Colonel Cool had shot away the hammer!"

"Then everybody looked for the colonel to turn round and salt the galoot for keeps, but, my hidel he kept on chatting with the barkeeper as if nothing had happened, not changing his position in the least. The man from the wilderness saw this, and he jerked out another revolver. But before he could use it, the colonel fired again from under his coat-tails and shot away the hammer as he had the first one! Then, as he took another sip at the stuff he was drinking, I heard him calmly observe to the barkeeper that it was the prime article and no mistake."

"What do you think of that, me noble sir?" "Moses," said Socorro Jim, soberly, "hell is full of liars."

Then the old scout and guide uttered a low exclamation as his eyes fell upon two persons who were pressing their way through the throng and approaching the gambling-table.

CHAPTER II.

THE BEGINNING OF A LITTLE GAME.

"THE Lucky Pards!"

The words fell from Old Jim's lips as his eyes rested on the two persons approaching the tables. In a moment the little old plainsman seemed to have forgotten Big Fist Mose and his story of the cool man of Santa Fe.

The two individuals who had attracted Socorro's attention were remarkably alike in appearance, both being slender and graceful of build and somewhat below medium height. They were foppish in appearance, being dressed in suits of brown velvet corduroy, patent leather boots, "b'iled" shirts and broad-brimmed sombreros of grayish color. Each carried heavy ebony canes with gold heads, but nowhere about their persons was there a display of weapons or jewelry.

Not over twenty-five years of age did either of the two pards in velvet corduroy appear, and they looked enough alike to be twin brothers, although they claimed they were in no way related. Their faces were somewhat effeminate for all of the slight mustaches which they wore. The chin of one was ornamented by an imperial, which was waxed to a point, as were the mustaches of both. Their eyes were black and keen.

The velvet dandies attracted considerable attention as they quietly made their way through the crowd and advanced toward the gambling-tables, many a half-drunken miner or ruffian turning to stare at them, but no one offering to molest them.

"What do me eyes behold?" gasped Big Fist Mose, as he surveyed the corduroy pards in evident surprise. "Were it not for the birsute appendages upon their lips I should say they were two very giddy girls thus attired. Jimmy, old boy, who are they—what are they?"

"Ther Lucky Pards—two o' ther toughest leetle nuts as ever struck this yere town o' Goodenough, you hear me! Fer all o' their lamb-like looks, them critters has got claws, you bet! They kin shoot an' shoot ter kill! Some o' ther boys tried to jump 'em w'en they fu'st struck ther town, but ther way they salted Hurricane Ike, ther leader o' ther gang, was beaucherful ter witness. They knocked both Ike's legs out from under him, an' now they are nussin' him roun' ag'in over at his shanty, an' I sw'ars they are ther whitest leetle galoots in ther Territory."

"Ah-a!" cried the big man, dramatically; "fear comes upon me—oh, much fear I some ill unlucky thing!" James, me lad, is there any danger of those pestiferous little runts chawin' up a poor critter like me?"

"I reckon not ef ye keep yer mouth shut."

"Then I'm dumb."

The velvet pards passed the old scout and his big companion, and sat down at a table that had just been deserted.

"Jimmy boy," and the big man allowed one of his huge hands to fall upon his companion's

arm, "wilt thou condescend to tell a poor devil why those dandy gents are called the Lucky Pards?"

"Ef you try 'em a whirl with keerds you won't need ter ax any questions. Thet thar leetle galoot with jest ther mustache is ther luckiest chap as ever handled ther papers; t'other one never plays. While Dandy Duce is handlin' ther keerds an' rakin' in ther scads, Silent Sid is standin' behind him with both hands in ther pockets o' his velvet jacket. It has been demonstrated, Moses, thet he has his fingers gripped round ther butts o' a pair o' self-cockin' guns all the while."

"Ready for business of another kind, eh? Well, that shows he has a level head. But, James, why do they sit there silently gazing around?"

"Reckon they has an app'intment ter meet some one thar. Perhaps thar's fun in ther air."

Socorro Jim was right; there was "fun" in the air. At this moment a loud voice near the bar was heard crying:

"Whar are ther little rats as calls theirselves ther Lucky Pards? We saw 'em come in hyer. Whar are they? Trot out ther insignifycant, small-sized runts as hev set theirselves up as ther best keerd-players in Goodenough! My pard hyer, Black Rolf of Gunnison, wants ter git at 'em. Whar are they, I say?"

The speaker, a big, brawny, red-whiskered fellow, pushed his way through the crowd, closely followed by a dark-eyed and black-bearded man. Both were dressed roughly in red shirts, broad-brimmed hats, pantaloons tucked into the tops of long-legged, mud-bedaubed boots, and wore around their waists leather belts thrust full of deadly weapons. Plainly they were good men for peaceably-inclined persons to steer clear of, unless anxious to provide a subject for a funeral.

"My pard is the champion poker-player from Collyrado," proclaimed the red-whiskered fellow. "He kin clean out any velvet galoot as ever set hoof in ther limits of Goodenough. He's a holy howler from High Notch, he is. Whar are ther Lucky Pards, I ask ag'in? Black Rolf of Gunnison wants ter git at 'em."

"James," came softly from the lips of Big-Fist Mose, "who is that red-headed pirate with the large-sized opening beneath his nasal protuberance?"

"Moses," was the old man's calm reply, "as a merry twinkle gleamed in his keen eyes, 'thet is ther only an' original Rube the Crusher."

"Then," declared the giant, giving the deal-table a terrible blow with his huge fist, "in the classic language of William Shakespeare, or some one else, 'He's my chowder!'"

But, just as Mose arose to his feet, the Crusher espied the Lucky Pards sitting quietly at the table.

"Hyer they are!" shouted Rube, triumphantly, as he hurried toward the velvet sports, the black-bearded man following close at his heels. "Right this yere way, galoots of Goodenough, ef you want ter see the champion poker-player from Gunnison take ther starch out of these little runts at ther own game."

Eager to see the sport, the crowd surged toward the tables, getting between Big Fist Mose and his intended "chowder," thus spoiling the giant's plans for the time. Before the huge fellow could force his way through the throng and reach the Crusher he found Socorro Jim at his side and heard the scout say earnestly:

"Another time, Moses; don't bust the game, fer ther love o' goodness! Jest git a good posish an' see Dandy Duce yank ther feathers out o' thet black-whiskered pilgrim's top-knot. Thar's fun—haydoogins o' it—ter foller! Reckon thar's some kind o' er game put up onter ther leetle pards. Ef so, it'll be a good time ter chip in w'en ye see w'at it is."

Somewhat reluctantly Mose relinquished his object for the time, and with Old Jim close at his heels, he pressed his way through the crowd and approached the table around which the throng had gathered. Looming four inches above the tallest and having such muscular arms, the giant did not find it very difficult to reach a position that suited him.

Dandy Duce had arisen to his feet and was facing Rube the Crusher as he quietly asked:

"Can I do anything for you, sir?"

"Kin ye?" echoed Rube. "Waal, I sh'u'd so remark! You are the little galoot as has been wipin' out all ther boys at ther own games, an' now I hev brought ye a man as kin knock ther tar out of ye at poker."

"Where is your man?"

"Right hyer. This is Black Rolf, of Gunnison, ther champion poker-player of Collyrado, an' an ole side pard of mine. He kin make ye see stars in about two shakes of no time, thet's ther kind of a hairpin he is!"

"If Black Rolf, of Gunnison has come here for a square quiet game, I can accommodate him," said Dandy, calmly. "If he has come to pick a quarrel, let him say so like a man and I will accommodate him. The fact is, I am the most accommodating fellow he ever struck."

At this the crowd laughed a little, and one fellow cried:

"Hooray fer Dandy Duce!"

Black Rolf now stepped forward.

"I want no quarrel," he declared. "I dropped down into this yere town by accident, and struck my old pard Rube, here. He told me about the Lucky Pards, and how they were cleaning out everything. I told him I would like to get at the fortunate gentlemen, and he brought me here. I presume you are the ones he mentioned. If so, let's proceed to business."

Plainly Black Rolf tried to be frank and open-appearing in manner, but for some reason Dandy regarded him distrustfully.

"I suppose you have the needful to play a pretty good-sized game?" questioned the corduroy sport.

For reply Rolf thrust one hand inside the bosom of his red shirt and produced a large roll of bills, which he flung carelessly on the table.

"That settles it," laughed Dandy Duce, as he sunk back into his chair. "My pard will give you his seat, and I will do my level best to make the game interesting for you. Sid, please order a fresh pack of cards. Gentlemen, I advise you not to press us too closely, for it is barely possible some of you may accidentally get shot at the close of the game. There is no telling what may occur."

Black Rolf took the offered seat, and the Crusher assumed a position close at his elbow. Silent Sid took his usual place at Dandy Duce's back, his hands thrust carelessly into the side-pockets of his velvet jacket. A fresh pack of cards, with the seal unbroken, was flung upon the table.

"Now," laughed Rube the Crusher, "jest watch my pard teach thet little sucker points at poker."

CHAPTER III.

THE END OF THE LITTLE GAME.

"In the first place," said Dandy Duce, grimly, "I want it understood that you are to keep your mouth closed," and he looked the Crusher fair in the face. "If you have anything to say about the game, you can say it when we are done."

"Seems ter me ye're derved p'tic'ler," growled the bully.

"Will you keep quiet?"

"I s'pose I'll hev ter, in order ter please ye. Babbys must have ther way sometimes."

The little sport paid no heed to the fellow's fling, but turned to Black Rolf with a question concerning the limit. Five thousand dollars was finally agreed upon. Then a coin was flipped, and Rolf broke open the wrapper, deal falling to him. Deftly he shook up the cards, and offered them for the cut, then tossed them off. The ante was set at a dollar, and the game was fairly opened.

"Thar's suthin' in ther wind," observed Socorro Jim, softly, to the big man at his side. "Them galoots has putt up some kind o' a job onter ther Lucky Pards, mark thet. Keep yer peepers skinned fer foul play, Moses."

"Bet your sweet life I do, Jimmy boy," nodded the giant. "There is blood in me eye, and all I want is a good excuse to climb onto the neck of Reuben the Crusher. Just let me tumble to a crooked move, old man."

The first three pots were small and Black Rolf won two of them. The fourth was a little larger, both players betting their hands for all they were worth, but feeling a little doubtful in regard to their value. Again the man from Gunnison was the winner.

"Ho, ho!" chuckled the Crusher, "didn't I tote ye!"

Dandy paid no heed to the speaker and did not seem to mind his loss in the least. Indeed, the little sport had sat at a table in the same saloon and seen pots ten times as large raked down by an opponent and not a muscle of his face had betrayed emotion of any kind.

"He's nerry, bet yer boots!" a citizen of the tough little town had once observed. "W'en he's winnin' he looks jest ez sweet ez honey, an' w'en he's losin' he continners ter look ther same way. He allus smiles w'en he shoots, an' he allus shoots ter hit."

Behind Dandy's chair Silent Sid stood with his sharp eyes watching every move. Nothing connected with the game escaped his observation.

"I am beginning to believe I have struck a pie," sneered Black Rolf, as he again threw out the cards. "But I do not wish to be accused of cold-blooded robbery, so if you have any better men in this sleepy camp, let them take this boy's place."

Dandy Duce laughed carelessly.

"My dear sir," he said, without the least trace of passion, "it is possible you may find your pie too hot for eating before you finish it. Do not be afraid of being accused of robbery unless you stole the money you had when you entered this saloon, for you are pretty certain to leave a good part of it, if not the whole, before you go out."

"I like to hear you talk," came scornfully from the lips of the black-bearded gambler. "It is a good thing to have confidence in one's ability. But business is business."

From that moment the game ran in favor of the sport in velvet, Dandy winning two pots out of three right along. Black Rolf showed his nerve by keeping remarkably cool in the face of his bad luck and declaring there was sure to be a crook in the lane before the end was reached. In

fact, he seemed to play like a person who feels he has a sure thing.

"I tell ye there's er cat in ther bag," persisted Socorro Jim, speaking guardedly to his huge companion.

"Right you are," was the response. "I hain't caught a glimpse of the critter yet, but by my troth, old man! I'll jump on it with both feet when I do."

A few minutes later Black Rolf got a wonderful hand. It was with the greatest difficulty he could control his features when he discovered by Dandy's betting that the little sport also had good cards.

Rolf had received three kings, an ace and a jack on the deal. He held the kings and discarded the others. To his delight, he drew another king and an ace, giving him a splendid four with one of the only four higher cards in the pack. It was one chance in thousands that Dandy Duce had secured a straight flush, the only hand by which he could be beaten; and when he considered that Dandy drew two cards, he felt it was absurdly improbable that the corduroy sport held a hand that would beat four kings and an ace.

But it soon became plain Dandy held good cards, although the sport bet cautiously at first and seemed to be "feeling" of his opponent.

Socorro Jim fairly held his breath, for he had caught a glimpse of Black Rolf's hand and believed the man from Gunnison was sure to win.

Gradually the bets grew heavier. Dandy smiled as serenely as ever, but Black Rolf began to grow nervous.

"I'll raise you a thousand!" the Colorado gambler finally exclaimed, as he nervously counted out the money and added it to the big pot.

"Good enough!" laughed the corduroy sport. "But don't think for an instant that you can bluff me, partner. I am a stayer. I will see your thousand and go you a thousand more."

"Great jewhilkens!" gasped Socorro Jim.

Black Rolf could not entirely conceal the look of exultation that flashed across his face, but as calmly as possible he raised the pot two thousand dollars.

"I'll make you pull in your horns if it takes every cent I have," he declared.

"I admire your pluck," smiled Dandy Duce, as he counted out two thousand dollars and added it to the pot; "but, let me tell you you have tackled a large-sized job," he added, raising the pot five thousand dollars!

For an instant the man from Gunnison turned a shade paler than was natural. The little sport had laid his cards face down on the table and was watching Black Rolf closely, seeming quite cool and collected. The dark-bearded man hesitated. Was it possible the corduroy sport had a straight flush? Absurd, for had he not drawn to three cards? The chance of filling a three-card straight flush on such a draw was one in millions. It must be, he reasoned, that the little man held fours—probably four queens.

"So you bet the limit, do you?" said Rolf, wetting his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. "You are getting reckless, my boy, but if you want to throw your money away like this, I am sure no one can blame me for scooping it in."

"Oh, you will be welcome to every cent you win on that hand," bowed Dandy Duce. "I may be a boy, but I have lived and rustled around in the world long enough to pick up a few points. If you skin me, the pelt will be yours for keeps."

"Talk about bluff," nervously laughed Black Rolf. "It is plain bluff is your game; but, I have seen better men at it—and scooped their money. I see you and raise you five thousand more."

"Oh, Lawd!" groaned Socorro Jim.

The crowd around the table began to scent trouble, and, with some exceptions, those directly behind the two desperate gamblers began to move aside so as to be out of the probable path of stray bullets. Silent Sid stood calmly behind the chair of his pard, apparently cool and unconcerned, but it was plain he was watching everything closely, ready for a sudden move.

"Your courage does not seem to be going back on you," observed the corduroy sport. "If your money holds out as well as your pluck, I shall reap a harvest. I will tell you frankly I am almost sure of winning, and if you wish, you may withdraw that last raise."

"What do you take me for?" cried the man from Gunnison, in amazement. "If you want to take back water, all right; but, let me tell you that you will have to see that last raise before you look at my cards. I never withdraw a bet."

"Very good! I am glad you have expressed yourself so plainly, for now I shall not be troubled by any twinges of conscience. Money talks every time, so here is your five thousand along with five more. If the limit was higher I would go the full extent."

Socorro Jim danced up and down with excitement. The old man had often seen big games, but there was something about this one that set every nerve twitching. He felt sure Dandy Duce was beaten, although he wondered at the recklessness of the little sport in making such

bets in the face of Black Rolf's confident manner.

Rube the Crusher remained silent with his hand resting on the handle of a knife in his belt.

"I only wish I had more money," asserted Black Rolf, as he counted out the last of a big roll. "If I had I would sit here and count it out on this hand till the cows come home. But, this is my last, and I shall have to call. If you have a straight flush the pile is yours. If not, you cannot hold over four kings and an ace and I rake the boodle," tossing his hand face upward as he spoke.

"Whoopie!" roared the Crusher. "My pard has scooped ther pot!"

"Four kings and an ace is a pretty good hand," calmly spoke Dandy Duce. "But, unfortunately for you, my friend, I have a straight flush—eight, nine, ten, jack and queen of hearts. Here they are; take a good look at them. Aren't they beauties?"

With a flip of his hand he turned the cards face upward and strung them out side, by side in plain view.

A death-like silence fell upon the crowd around the table. For several seconds it seemed every one held his breath. Dandy was the first to break the silence.

"You see I have fairly won the money," he smiled, as he slid the cards together one above the other and reached to gather in the pot.

At that instant Silent Sid felt both his wrists seized by some one behind him.

Then Rube the Crusher bent swiftly forward, clutching the outstretched hand of the winner and driving a knife through Dandy's cards, pinning them to the table.

"Foul play!" he roared, hoarsely. "I twigged ther crooked game!"

But, before another move could be made, the bully felt an iron hand clutch his throat, and as the muzzle of a revolver pressed fairly against his temple, a calm, pleasant voice was heard to say:

"My dear sir, I advise you to put up that knife before you get the whole roof of your head blown off."

And, looking full into the face of the quiet speaker, Big Fist Mose fairly howled:

"Colonel Cool, by chowder!"

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT FOLLOWED THE GAME.

A MOMENT of breathless suspense followed, then the stranger who had seized the Crusher said:

"Gentlemen, all be quiet and this matter will be settled in a few moments without a row. There is a slight mistake here, that is plain, and all lovers of fair play will desire justice done."

"Bet yer boots!" piped Socorro Jim, as he promptly jerked out a revolver and covered Black Rolf just as that worthy was reaching for a weapon. "Slow an' easy thar, critter! Draw a pop an' Ole Jim pulls trigger!"

"Under the circumstances," observed Big Fist Mose, as he produced and cocked the revolver that had hung upon his hip, "it behooves me to put an oar into this yere puddle. I am bound to assist in keeping peace here if I have to shoot every galoot beneath this glorious canvas canopy, you hear me!"

Things had taken a sudden and unexpected turn. It was plain a "job" had been "put up" on the Lucky Pards, but, it was also plain that the prompt act of the cool stranger had "nipped it in the bud."

Silent Sid's wrists were released as promptly as they had been seized, and when he wheeled, a revolver in each hand, it was impossible to tell who had grasped him.

"My dear sir," purred a soft voice in the right ear of Rube the Crusher, "will you kindly oblige me by releasing your grasp upon that gentleman's wrist? Also please leave your knife standing where it is. If you favor me, you will save me the unpleasant duty of providing a subject for a funeral."

There was something decidedly *deadly* about that calm, pleasant voice, and with sudden fear, the bully relinquished his hold on Dandy Duce's wrist and at the same time unclasped his fingers from the haft of his knife, leaving the weapon quivering where it stood pinning the corduroy sport's cards to the table.

"Many thanks," smiled the man whom Big Fist Mose had called Colonel Cool, showing two rows of beautiful white teeth as his lips parted.

"You put me under obligations."

"Dern ye!" growled the Crusher, rolling his eyes round to get a glimpse of the man who had so suddenly "chipped in." "W'at in blazes do ye mean by grabbin' a feller's wozzle in sich er way? W'at'd'yer want anyhow?"

"Fair play, dear sir, fair play."

"Then w'at yer jumpin' on me fer? I jest spotted a crooked game an' wuz goin' ter expose it."

"Is—that—so? To say the least, your statement is surprising. But, if you discovered anything crooked, you shall have the chance to make the exposure. Speak up promptly. What's the game?"

"Tain't no use now; you've made a mess of it—blame ye're hide!"

"But I *know* you will favor me by giving me the points. Speak right out."

Rube shivered. There was something about that calm, pleasant drawl that he did not like. Still he hesitated.

"If you do not tell what it was you discovered, this crowd will be apt to think you did not discover anything," pursued the stranger. "Now, what did you mean by driving your knife through those cards?"

"Ther little runt held six keerds," declared the bully, desperately, finding he must say something. "He flipped 'em kinder slick like an' kep' one concealed under t'others."

"A lie, gentlemen!" cried Dandy Duce, rising to his feet, his eyes flashing fire. Up to this moment both Dandy and Silent Sid had been staring at Colonel Cool as if they saw a ghost, but in the excitement of the occasion no one had noticed their strange looks.

"Slow and easy, young man," smiled the calm man, again showing his white teeth. "If this person has lied, it will be easy to prove it. I fancy he has, and he is a pitiable bungler. In pinning those cards to the table with his knife he marked every one, and if there are not six as he claims, he defeated himself by his act, for in no way can another card be placed beneath the blade."

Black Rolf made a sudden move to seize the knife, but Socorro Jim was watching for just such an attempt.

"Tetch it an' I'll scatter yer brains!" he sharply cried. "Han's off!"

With an oath of baffled rage, the black-bearded man relinquished his purpose.

"Now," said Colonel Cool, "will some honest man kindly remove the knife and count the cards before us all?"

"You bet!" responded a sharp, decisive voice, as a small man elbowed his way through the crowd. "I want this matter settled, for it is spoiling trade at the bar, so I will count the cards."

"Hooray fer Uncle Jerry!" shouted one of the spectators. "He's white, every time."

It was the proprietor of the Wanderer's Home. He quickly removed the knife and counted the cards, laying them on the table so those around could see them plainly.

"There are just five," he declared promptly, "and as clean a straight flush as I ever put eyes on."

"That settles it," shouted Big Fist Mose. "The wealth belongs to the gentleman in velvet, and Reuben the Crusher is a liar from Fibtown."

"I made a mistake," faltered the bully, his face pale with rage and chagrin. "My eyes fooled me. But no man ketches me by ther throat an' shoves a gun ag'in' my head without payin' fer it, you kin mark that!"

"My dear sir," bowed Colonel Cool, smiling sweetly, "I always pay my debts, and I insist on settling this one at once if you have a charge against me."

"Waal, I have, an' I propose ter knock ther packin' out of ye."

"In other words you challenge me to fight you?"

"Yes."

"All right. I have a record to make in this town, and may as well begin now as any time. But, I shall not fight you in prize-ring-style. You have challenged me and I shall choose the weapon and name the mode of combat."

"I don't keer a dern about thet," growled the Crusher. "All I want is ter git at ye in some way."

"Then that point is settled. I suppose you wish to 'get at me' at once? I always desire to get such little affairs off my hands as soon as possible."

"It can't be too soon ter please me."

At this point Uncle Jerry broke in.

"If you are going to fight, gents, the street is the place for it. I never allow anything of the kind in the saloon on Sundays, for there is too much danger of some of the crowd getting hurt. You will oblige me by adjourning to the street at once."

There were no remonstrances, for the crowd knew the proprietor of the Wanderer's Home never said a thing unless he meant it, so a general rush was made for the door and the throng poured out upon the street, eager to witness the "sport."

Barely had he reached the open air when Colonel Cool found himself confronted by Dandy Duce.

"This is my quarrel," declared the little sport, his voice having a sharp, metallic sound. "I am able to take care of myself, sir. Without doubt your intentions were well enough, but I scarcely feel like thanking you for chipping in as you did. There were enough present to see fair play."

"My dear young friend," drawled the Man from Santa Fe, speaking in a manner that seemed almost offensively familiar. "I have not asked thanks of any one. I chipped in because I could not help it. I always desire fair play, and I knew there was a game being worked on you and your pard. Here he stopped and stared critically at Silent Sid, who was standing a bit behind Dandy.

"If there is to be a fight with that big bully,

I am the one to meet him," insisted the sport his face growing crimson with suppressed emotion. "You shall not fight on *my* account."

"Well, then I will fight him on my own," declared the colonel, showing his white teeth in an icy smile. "I suppose I have that privilege?"

"I will be under no obligations to *you*," fiercely asserted Dandy Duce, his usual coolness having deserted him entirely. "But it would give me pleasure to stand in his boots and face *you* with a pistol!" and before Colonel Cool could utter another word, he wheeled and strode straight up to Rube the Crusher.

"I am the one you have got to fight, you dirty galoot!" cried the corduroy sport. "You have insulted me and must fight me first. When I am through with you, any one else who desires may have a turn at you."

"Get out!" snarled the bully. "I hain't goin' ter fight you. All I want is ter git at that slick critter in ther store clothes an' tall bat."

"But you have *got* to fight me first!"

"Waal, I jest *won't*, an' thet settles it."

It seemed Dandy Duce was about to fly at Rube in desperation when Big Fist Mose pushed his ponderous frame between the two, saying:

"Soft, soft I tell ye, babbling ones. By thy foolish talk much time is let to waste. And by the great horn spoon, this crowd is eager for the fray!"

Dandy seemed to suddenly change his mind, for without a word, he turned away, and, followed by his pard, mingled with the crowd, disappearing in its midst.

"Now," cried Big Fist Mose, with a grand wave of one broad hand, "ther band is about to play and the fun begin."

CHAPTER V.

A NOVEL DUEL.

"COME, you tall bat lulu!" bellowed Rube the Crusher, leering insultingly at the man from Santa Fe; "git out hyer an' let me have a chance at ye. I propose ter run a tunnel in yer system fust pop."

"You shall have a chance to try your luck at tunnel-making soon enough," smiled Colonel Cool, as he carefully polished his silk hat with a spotless white handkerchief. "But, there are a few preliminary arrangements to be made."

"Dern yer preliminary arrangements!" snarled the bully. "I reckon you want ter stave this yere affair off; but I hain't goin' ter let yer squawk. You've got ter stan' up in front of my gun an' take yer med'cine."

"I suppose you consider yourself quite a man with the revolver."

"Bet yer shirt! I kin drive nails with either hand."

"But I should think you would injure the butts of your weapons if you drove nails with them."

"Butts?" howled the Crusher in derision. "I drive nails with bullets, an' stan' twenty paces from ther nails w'en I do it."

"Really!" and the colonel lifted his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Then you must be a very dangerous man to face in a duel with such weapons."

"Now ye'r shoutin! But you can't beg off; it's no use fer ye ter try."

"Then I won't try. But, seeing you are such a remarkable man with a gun, I will give you a fine chance to show your skill. We will stand back to each other twenty paces apart and shoot without turning our heads."

For an instant the bully seemed struck dumb with astonishment, then he gasped:

"Stan' back to each other! Did I hear straight?"

"That was what I said."

"Are ye a blamed fool?"

"I reckon not."

"But such a thing is ridiculous," asserted Black Rolf, stepping forward. "How would you shoot?"

"Over our shoulders."

"And hit any one but the person you aimed at. I hardly think the sensible people of Good-enough will permit such a thing. It is ridiculous, I say."

"Not at all, my dear sir. I can do as good shooting that way as the other."

"Then I'll bet a horse you can't hit ther side of a barn at three feet," cried the Crusher.

"You may sing another song before you are through with me," responded the cool man.

"But, how are you going to take aim?" asked Black Rolf, beginning to believe the stranger was making sport of them.

"With the aid of this," and Colonel Cool held up a pocket mirror.

There was a moment of silence, for it suddenly dawned on the Crusher and his gambler pard that the Man from Santa Fe had not been talking as wildly as they supposed. They fully understood his plan, and the bully turned a shade pale as he growled:

"Thet hain't no way ter fight er duel. I hain't no trick feller as goes round makin' exhibitions of myself."

"Do you take water?" drawled the colonel, a derisive smile curling his lips and showing his white teeth beneath the blond mustache.

"Not by a derned sight!"

"Then you will have to submit to the terms."
 "I hain't got no glass."
 "Then I shall be pleased to furnish you with one," said Cool, producing another mirror.
 "You may take your choice."
 "That's the stuff!" cried Big Fist Mose, his face beaming in anticipation of the "fun" to follow. "Take your choice, Reuben, or take water."

Black Rolf whispered something in the Crusher's ear and the latter at once selected one of the mirrors.

"Of all ther derned fool business I ever saw!" he growled. "But I reckon I *can* shoot with a glass."

"Of course you can," agreed Old Socorro Jim; "but I want ter be under kiver w'en you pull trigger."

"Will you kindly clear the street in the immediate vicinity?" asked Colonel Cool, nodding to Big Fist Mose.

"You bet I will, me lord!" was the prompt reply, as the giant drew his big revolver and flourished it above his head.

"Get back here!" he shouted. "Base vandals, clear a space in this yere vicinity, for in about two or five shakes of a mule's off hind hoof, bullets will be flying here as thick as honeybees around a sunflower. Some of you fellows will get perforated if you continue to stand round promise'us like."

In a few moments he succeeded in his purpose and everything was ready for the singular duel.

"Now," spoke Colonel Cool, "we will step in here and stand back to back with our revolvers in our right hands and the mirrors in our left. Big Fist will count ten, deliberately, and at each number we will advance a pace. At ten we will be twenty paces apart. Then he shall give us time to make ready and fire at the word. Is that satisfactory?"

The bully acknowledged it was, and then the two men stepped forward and stood back to back. They presented a strange contrast at that moment, one being attired in the rough garb of a miner and the other dressed like a Broadway swell.

The crowd pressed still further back, some taking refuge where they thought they would be safe from wildly flying bullets, for almost every one believed he was to see an exhibition of wild shooting.

It was plain the Crusher had many friends in the crowd, for more than one advised him to bore the high hat dandy.

"Oh, I'll fix him," asserted the bully. "I shall drop him fu'st shot."

"Well, I want to tell you both one thing," said Big Fist Mose as he stood with a cocked revolver in his hand; "I shall drop the first one who plays crooked. If either of you tries to whirl round and take a shot without the aid of the mirror, I shall let fly at him right where he lives. That is, as William Shakespeare often remarked, business straight from the shoulder."

"Ready, now, for I am about to count."

Then, with the cocked revolver held ready for use, he counted ten, each of the duelists taking a step as he spoke a number. At ten they halted.

Ready," called Mose.

With the right hand each man pointed his revolver over his left shoulder, holding the mirror with his other hand so he could see the reflected form of his enemy.

The crowd became very still, every man having his eyes fastened on the participants in the novel duel. Big Fist began to count:

"One!"

The spectators held their breath.

"Two!"

Carefully the duelists took aim by means of the mirrors.

"Three—FIRE!"

Colonel Cool touched the trigger just a moment before the Crusher.

"Oh, holy Moses!" bellowed Rube, as he danced around, with his revolver lying on the ground at his feet. "Oh, great Scott! Oh! Ow-wow-wow!"

"What is the matter?" demanded Black Rolf, rushing toward the howling man. "Are you hit?"

"Hit!" snarled the Crusher—"I should say I was! Ther side of my face an' neck feel like a hull swarm of bees had been there. Oh, great sizzlin' Christopher!" and he clung to the side of his face and howled again.

"Let me see," commanded Rolf, snatching away the bully's hand. "Why, there's nothing here but some little specks of blood! His bullet has not hit you here. Shut up your infernal yelling!"

"I tell you I'm hit somewhar," insisted the Crusher. "My han' got an awful shock, an' feels as numb as a stick. Did I kill ther high hat galoot?"

Black Rolf uttered an exclamation of disgust. "Kill him!—you didn't even fire!"

"W'at!" roared Rube, in amazement. "Did my gun miss fire? I pulled ther trigger."

The black-bearded gambler picked up the bully's weapon, and a cry of surprise came from his lips.

"The hammer is gone!" he exclaimed. "His bullet carried it clean away!"

The Crusher vented an oath of amazement.

"That explains the shock which benumbed your arm," said Rolf. "And it was the fine particles of lead from the shattered bullet which struck your neck and face. You are all right, man."

"I may be all right," admitted Rube, staring at the hammerless weapon in the other's hand, "but ef I want ter keep all right, I reckon I hadn't better buck any more ag'in' a man as kin shoot like thet."

"Bah, you fool! You don't suppose he shot the hammer away intentionally? It was an accident."

"Mebbe so, mebbe not."

"Will you try him again?"

The bully hesitated.

"I hain't anxious about cashin' my chips," he said, somewhat sullenly.

"Remember my offer—a hundred dollars if you kill him!" whispered the dark-eyed gambler.

"Meck it another hundred an' I'll try him another hack."

"Done! Two hundred it is! Shoot to kill!"

At this moment the clatter of a horse's hoofs was heard, followed by a shrill cry.

Down the street came a black horse upon which a dark-faced, wild-looking yet rather handsome girl was mounted man fashion. She was dressed in a short skirt, buckskin leggings and loose blouse waist of crimson stuff. Her head was uncovered and her long black hair being unconfined streamed out behind her.

"Ther cowboys!" she cried, waving one hand above her head—"ther cowboys are comin' ter take ther town!"

CHAPTER VI.

COWBOYS IN TOWN.

"APACHE NAN! Apache Nan!"

It was plain from these cries that the crowd recognized the dashing girl rider of the black horse.

"Ther cowboys!" shrieked Apache Nan again, as the horse thundered on down the street.

"They're on a holy tear!"

Her words produced considerable consternation. Up the street from whence she had come men were seen running toward the nearest doorways, and the sound of a wild cheer followed by a rattling volley of revolver-shots came from a dense cloud of dust still further on.

"Ther cowboys!" echoed many a voice. "To kiver every galoot!"

Then there was a general scattering, the duel and duelists being forgotten in a moment.

"What in the name of the Prophets has broken loose now?" gasped Big Fist Mose, staring in amazement first at the scattering crowd and then at the swiftly approaching dust cloud, in the van of which could be seen several horsemen. "Is it a Kansas cyclone or what?"

"It's cowboys on a tear," replied the shrill voice of Socorro Jim, close at his elbow. "Better git ter kiver, Moses, an' guv 'em ther hull street. Nan said they are comin' ter take ther town, an' she knew w'at she wuz talkin' about."

"Who's Nan?"

"She's my gal as went past on ther black hoss. She's a jo-daisy, you bet! But, we hain't got no time ter chin. Foller me."

Mose glanced around for Colonel Cool, but the Man from Santa Fe had disappeared. Having made this discovery, he did not hesitate to follow Old Jim to a place of shelter.

Down the street like a whirlwind came the dust-cloud, the rattle of revolver-shots, and sounds of wild yells making it seem a band of demons had broken loose. There were between thirty and forty horsemen in the midst of the cloud, and every man grasped a revolver in either hand, firing into the air, while he howled as if trying to split his throat.

More than once had Goodenough been visited by the cowboys from the Double Bar and Sweetwater Ranches, and those visits had taught the citizens of the place to give the herders plenty of room when they came to take the town. It had proved to be a very "unhealthy" thing to get in their way.

If allowed to have their own sweet will, the cowboys seldom did much damage, although they usually took possession of the place and drove every citizen under cover. Once the people had rallied and faced the invaders, but the cowboys had handled them very rough indeed, leaving behind them several subjects for "planting." They swore they would burn the town if the citizens "repeated the offense."

The leader of the raids was usually a young fellow of twenty from the Double Bar, where he was chief cowboy, despite his years. Thomas Hayward—called Holy Terror Tom by his mates—took a wild delight in riding at the head of the tough crowd of the two ranches as they dashed down the street of Goodenough, yelling like a band of crazy savages, firing their revolvers as they went. It was sport for him to see the frightened people scampering for the nearest place of shelter.

As for the men who followed behind the dashing cowboy chief, nearly every one looked on Tom as the prince of good-fellows and a devil-may-care chap to be admired and re-

spected. The cowboys of the Double Bar and Sweetwater Ranches were mostly Americans, which accounted for their friendly relations. They were rather violent in their hatred for Greasers in general and Greaser herders in particular.

Among the spectators of the singular duel had been a young man whose dress and appearance indicated he was lately from the States—a genuine tenderfoot. He was a good-looking fellow, with pleasant blue eyes and a manly, open face, which, however, wore a careworn and anxious expression. Attracted by the gathering on the street, he had approached just after Dandy Duce and Silent Sid disappeared amid the throng.

The tenderfoot scanned the duelists with careless indifference till he obtained a fair look at the face of Colonel Cool, then he started somewhat, muttering:

"By gracious! I have seen that man somewhere before!"

In fact, there was something unusual and striking about the face of the Man from Santa Fe—an indescribable something that made it a face to be remembered.

Closely the blue-eyed Easterner regarded the features of the cool man, each moment becoming more and more convinced he *had* seen them before. But where?

That was a question he repeatedly asked himself in vain. It seemed he could almost remember where he had looked on the face of the neatly-attired colonel, but—not quite.

"If I am not mistaken," thought the tenderfoot, whose name was Edward Morgan, "that man crossed my path at an unpleasant moment."

When he heard the colonel speak he became still more strongly convinced he had seen the man before and heard his voice. Like the colonel's face, there was something not easily forgotten about his icy-smooth and somewhat drawling tones.

With breathless interest Edward Morgan watched the singular duel. Although he had no sympathy with Rube the Crusher, yet for some unaccountable reason he hoped the bully would drop the Man from Santa Fe. Within his bosom was a feeling of dislike for the cool colonel, and the feeling was rapidly developing into hatred.

"I don't know why," he thought, "but I believe that man is a snake. I feel as if he is an enemy of mine—or will become such."

He was disappointed when he witnessed the result of the duel, although he had hardly dared hope the bully would prove the best man. He had longed for fortune to befriend the Crusher.

Then Apache Nan appeared shouting her warning.

Although he did not understand just what it all meant, Edward followed the example of the crowd and hurried toward the nearest doorway, happening to dash straight into the Wanderer's Home. Half within the door, he paused an instant to look up the street, almost fancying by the yelling and shooting that the town had been attacked by Indians.

"Come in hyer, ye derned fool!" yelled some one within the bar-room. "Ef ye're peekin' out thar in thet way, ye'll be purty derned ap' ter stop a lead pill."

Within the saloon he found a gang of swearing men, one-half of whom were flourishing weapons and uttering bitter threats against the cowboys.

"Dad burn 'em all!" roared one fellow, swinging both hands above his head, each containing a big revolver. "They think they kin come in hyer an' run this town jest as they please, but ef ever man wuz like me they'd go skippin' out of ther place right peert, you bet!"

"Blame er cowboy anyhow, sez I!" shouted another. "They're allus buckin' ag'in' spectable people. Thar's enough good men in this yere town ter wipe 'em out in great shape ef everbody didn't run ther instant he knew they wuz comin'."

"Thet's boss sense," agreed another. "Thar's enough in hyer ter go out an' run ther hull gang out o' camp, an' I fer one am ready fer ther fun."

"Hark!" shouted still another. "Hyer they are! Great roarin' thunder! they're comin' in hyer!"

The words produced a panic. The very men who had been making such bold talk were the first to rush for the rear door.

In at the open front door rode a mounted cowboy, stooping in the saddle to escape bumping his head, and giving a yell that sounded like a blast from a steam whistle the instant he was fairly inside. Others followed, and they began shooting the canvas roof above the heads of the madly surging mob struggling to escape by the rear door.

"Go it, you cripples!" yelled Holy Terror Tom, with a wild burst of laughter at the sight. "Claw out of this, you coyotes! Whoop-war-hoo!"

In at the door, one by one, filed the cowboys, and out at the back entrance surged the crowd that had been so eager to "git at 'em" a few moments before. The bold men seemed to have changed their minds with remarkable suddenness—or perhaps they had urgent business in other parts of the town.

Ned Morgan made no attempt to escape, for

he realized there would be as much danger of getting injured in the crush as in remaining behind and keeping quiet. So he quietly held his place and watched the excitement, realizing he was witnessing a bit of wild life in the "wild and woolly West." At first the cowboys did not seem to notice him.

The barkeeper had taken refuge beneath the bar, but several heavy thumps from the butt of Holy Terror Tom's revolver caused him to make his appearance, looking quite white, but grinning in a sickly manner. He was quite alone, his assistants having deserted him with the rush.

"Hello, old p'izen-slinger!" cried the leader of the cowboys. "Hustle around and set out bug-juice for the boys. We're almighty dry. Stir your bones if you want to keep a whole skin!"

Then for the first time the cowboy chief espied Ned Morgan.

CHAPTER VII.

FOR HIS LIFE.

"HELLO!" exclaimed Holy Terror Tom; "what have we here?"

"A tenderfoot!" shouted one of the cowboys, instantly "sizing up" the young stranger in Goodenough.

"Tenderfoot or not," said Tom, "he's the only man who didn't run like a coyote when we came in here. I say, partner, come up and take something with the boys."

"Many thanks for the invitation," smiled Ned. "I hate to decline, but, the fact is, I never drink anything stronger than cold water or coffee."

Several of the cowboys uttered shouts of derision, but at the sound of Morgan's voice Holy Terror Tom started and gazed at him with renewed interest.

"Mammy's baby!" mocked one.

"Little pet!" sneered another.

"Where's his bottle?" shouted a third, with a burst of coarse laughter.

But a word from the leader silenced their cries.

"Did you know," said Tom, sternly eying the Easterner, "that it is a very unhealthy thing to refuse to drink when invited in this country?"

"I have heard so," was the calm reply.

"Then don't you think you had better come up and have something with the gang?"

"I have told you I never drink liquor, and I meant just what I said. I mean no offense, but I do not drink with any one, so you have no cause to get angry."

"You will find it difficult to stick to that line in this section, and I warn you that you are pretty sure to stop a bullet or provide a sheath for a knife if you refuse to drink with some of the people you will meet in New Mexico. Come up and have something!"

Ned began to believe the cowboys would attempt to force him to drink, but having once declined, he was not the person to be bullied into a thing. Indeed, he was one of those people who can sometimes be coaxed but never driven.

With a short laugh, he shook his head firmly, again asserting he meant no offense but positively declaring he would not drink for any man.

To the great surprise of Holy Terror Tom's companions, the cowboy turned toward the bar without another word, saying:

"Swallow your p'izen, lads."

The cowboys did not stop for glasses, but the bottles were passed round and every man took a pull at them. Then the leader tossed some money on the bar, telling the barkeeper to keep the change. His next move was to wheel his horse and face the tenderfoot, saying:

"It seems to me there is something familiar about your face and voice, pard."

Now Ned Morgan had been thinking there was something familiar about the cowboy, although he was inclined to believe his imagination was responsible for what he fancied he saw; but Tom's words renewed the impression that for a second time that day he had met some one whom he had seen in the past.

"I was thinking the same concerning you," Ned replied.

Hayward laughed. It was plain he had been drinking freely before he entered the Wanderer's Home and was in just the mood to become amused or angered by the most unexpected things.

"It is possible we have met before," he observed.

"It seems that way to me."

"Is this your first trip into the West? It is plain you are from the States."

"Yes, this is my first pilgrimage through the wild and woolly West. I am a veritable tenderfoot."

"I thought so. The fact is as plain as if you were labeled. But, as I have been in the West since I was fourteen years old, you must have seen me when I was a boy, if you ever saw me at all."

"Perhaps that is why I do not remember you any better. You must have changed since you were fourteen."

"Well, I should say so!" with a bitter laugh.

"And the change has not been for the better, either."

"And I have changed also in that time, for I am not more than three years older than you."

"But in your case the change could not have been for the worse. A man who does not drink cannot be very bad."

"I am not so sure of that."

For a few moments the cowboy chief was silent, then he abruptly demanded:

"What State are you from?"

"Pennsylvania."

"So? Me too!"

"It begins to look like we were not mistaken in fancying we had met before."

"That's so. Anyway I am pleased to meet any one from the old State who did not have to run away like a criminal, as I did. There is one man back there against whom I hold an undying hatred. Some day I will have revenge on the old whelp, curse him and all of his blood!"

Holy Terror Tom's eyes gleamed like coals of fire as he almost snarled the savage words and his handsome face became black with the worst passion that convulses a man's soul. Of a sudden, a name fell from Ned Morgan's tongue:

"Tom Hayward!"

The cowboy started as if shot.

"So you know my name, do you!" he cried.

"Then you must be from Corydon! Who are you?"

But Ned did not reply to the question. Instead, he said:

"Great heavens, Tom! I never expected to set eyes on you again. It was reported you died of yellow fever in the South."

"Ha! ha! ha!" wildly laughed the young cowboy chief. "I caused that notice to be placed in the papers, and I took good care that the papers reached my friends and foes in the old home. I knew my enemies would be satisfied if they believed me dead. But I am alive, and some day I shall return to Corydon. I ran away like a dog, but I have not forgotten the man whom I have to thank for it all—oh, no, I have not forgotten him!"

Ned Morgan felt very uncomfortable at that moment, and sincerely wished he had not met Tom Hayward. He saw the young fellow was excited by the liquor he had swallowed, and he was certain the revelation that must follow would produce an unpleasant scene. If he had only known how unpleasant he would have resorted to the most barefaced prevarication before revealing the truth.

After a moment, Hayward again demanded:

"Who are you?"

"Can it be you cannot recall my name?"

Once more the cowboy stared at the Easterner. Suddenly he uttered an oath and the cry:

"No, by heavens! it isn't possible!"

"Yes, it is, Tom," said Ned, as calmly as he could. "I am—"

"Ned Morgan!"

"You have hit it."

Like a flash Holy Terror Tom leaped from the saddle, and when he struck the sawdust a revolver gleamed in his hand.

"Eben Morgan's son!" he shouted. "Great Scott, what luck!"

"I am glad to know you are not dead, Tom," Ned declared, with perfect sincerity.

"Glad?" burst from the lips of the excited cowboy. "It will prove a sorry discovery for you! My hour for revenge has come!"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? You shall discover, Ned Morgan? It was your father who fixed the burning of Cyrus Bent's buildings on my shoulders! But for your father I would not have been forced to leave my home and fly like a hunted animal. But for your father the prison doors would not have yawned for me because old Bent nearly perished in his burning house! Do you think I have forgotten those things?"

"It is plain you have not," Ned forced himself to say as calmly as possible.

"Can you understand what it was for me to be driven from school, Ned Morgan?" continued Tom, growing more and more excited. "I was ambitious, if poor. You know as well as I that my disgrace broke my mother's heart, and when she heard of my supposed death, she just lay down and died. I was all her pride and joy. I have managed to keep track of things in Corydon after a manner, and I know how after mother's death my poor old father took to drink and went to the dogs. And who caused all this misery, Ned Morgan?"

"Were you not in a measure responsible, Tom?"

"A retort fit for the son of the man who worked so hard to send to prison a fourteen-year-old boy who was guilty of a rash act! I could expect nothing more. But I will strike that man through his own flesh and blood. For years I have dreamed of revenge, and now my time has come. In a measure I shall be repaid for the thousands of hardships I have endured since I turned my back on my home and fled away through the night. Ha! ha! ha! Sleeping or walking, day or night, winter or summer, all the many years which now seem scarcely more than a day, I have thought of but one thing—revenge!"

The speaker fairly shook with the fierceness of his passion and his sun-tanned face had turned grayish-white. Ned Morgan understood his position was perilous in the extreme, for in his blind fury the young cowboy might be guilty of any mad act.

"You were your father's pride in the old days," Tom continued. "If anything had happened to you, he would have gone crazy, I believe. How it will wring his heart when he hears you are dead! for you may as well know I mean to kill you, Ned Morgan! But, I do not wish to shoot you down in cold blood, although I shall be forced to do so if you make an attempt to defend yourself. Have you a revolver?"

Ned bowed, his tongue refusing to move just then.

"Then use it," cried Holy Terror Tom, still shaking like a person with the ague. "You shall have fair play. Draw—draw I say!"

Like one in a dream Ned Morgan obeyed, scarcely knowing what he did. He did not wish to shoot the mad young cowboy, but he felt he must defend his own life in some way.

"Ready!" shouted Tom. "One, two, three—fire!"

Both weapons spoke as one. The cowboy was a dead shot, but at that moment he was so unnerved by his furious anger that he only succeeded in putting a bullet through Ned's coat-sleeve.

The young Easterner had fired blindly without the least aim, and was amazed and horrified to see the cowboy fling up his arms and fall heavily on the sawdust-covered ground!

CHAPTER VIII.

APACHE NAN OBJECTS.

It would be difficult to picture Ned Morgan's feelings at that moment. He had not intended to shoot the cowboy, but in the blind, unreasoning excitement of the moment he had sought to do something in self-defense, and had drawn his weapon and fired at the word. The bullet that clipped his sleeve passed clean through the slab wall of the saloon behind him, making it plain the enraged cowboy had only missed by an accident.

As for Tom Hayward's companions they seemed amazed by the result of the shooting. They knew Tom as a dead shot, and it did not seem possible that he could miss the bigness of a man at such a distance. Besides that, they had not dreamed that the tenderfoot could hit the side of a house unless he got the muzzle of his weapon against it when he pulled trigger.

As Tom fell, several of the cowboys sprung from their horses and gathered around him, seeming to have forgotten Ned Morgan for the moment. Ned knew the companions of the fallen man were desperate fellows at best, and being partially intoxicated, they might take it into their heads to shoot him in his tracks in retaliation for what he had done.

"Now is my time to get!" flashed through his head, as he saw the cowboys gather round their fallen leader.

Like a flash he darted out of the door. Not a moment too soon.

A sudden wild yell came from the bar-room—a cry that was terrible in its meaning—a cry for vengeance!

"They will be after me in a moment!" thought the fleeing man, as he started down the street at a run. "I must watch for a door into which I can dodge. I shall have to face them somewhere."

That was far from a pleasant thought, for he realized there would not be one chance in a hundred of escaping with his life if the cowboys set out to avenge their fallen leader.

If they did! At that very moment he glanced over his shoulder and saw them come riding out of the saloon yelling like fiends incarnate. In another instant they came down the street in pursuit.

The main street of Goodenough had seemed deserted a few seconds before, for all the citizens had taken care to get under cover, intending to remain thus till the cowboys left the town.

As he ran, Ned glanced wildly to the right and left, looking for an open doorway into which he could dodge—but in vain! Every door seemed closed tightly. The citizens of Goodenough had taken care to shut themselves off from the cattle-men as well as they could, past experience having taught them what it was for cowboys to come into the place on a tear.

Almost as soon as the maddened cowboys caught sight of the fleeing figure they opened fire with the weapons they had already drawn, at the same time urging their horses after the tenderfoot.

Some of the people would have thrown open their doors for the panting, white-faced fugitive, but when they understood the situation it was too late, the man having already rushed past.

When the cowboys had swept down the street in pursuit, doors were thrown open and people flocked out to witness the termination of the chase, every man being armed in some manner.

Ned heard the bullets sing viciously past his

ears and knew he was in constant danger of dropping with one in his body. Once or twice he half resolved to turn and face his pursuers, giving them as good as they sent as long as he could keep on his feet, but before he could do so he felt a stinging pain in his left shoulder and knew he was hit.

Then he stumbled and fell in the dusty street, stunned and dazed so he had not the power to struggle up again.

With savage yells of triumph, the cowboys came tearing down on him, but they ceased firing when they saw him fall.

The unfortunate fellow succeeded in lifting himself somewhat as they approached, raising the hand that still clutched the revolver, and making a desperate effort to cover the nearest horseman before he pressed the trigger. But, black spots floated before his vision, his strength failed him, and with a low moan, he fell back, firing straight up into the air.

"Ride over ther cuss! ride him down!" yelled several voices as the enraged men came thundering up.

"Stop!" shouted the cowboy at whom Ned had attempted to fire, facing his comrades with one hand uplifted. "Go a little slow, pard! We've got him foul an' fast, so thar's no chance fer him t' escape."

"Fill him full of lead!" howled a red-whiskered fellow.

"Hold on, Tony Hotcake!" cried the cautious cowboy, covering the red-beard with a ready revolver. "The man's down, can't ye see that? Don't wipe him out like you wuz a pack of 'Pachy Injins.'"

"He killed Tom!"

"Thet's Gospel, but w'at's the usual end of a murderer thet receives the full length of the law?"

"He's pardoned," was the swift reply.

But this attempt at a joke failed to affect the black scowl which darkened the faces of the men.

"Hanging is the proper punishment for murder," continued the fellow who had advised them to "go a little slow." "If we use any other means in avengin' our pard we shall brand ourselves in Goodenough as cut-throats."

"Guv him ther rope!"

"Hooray fer a limb!"

"Judge Lynch, but no trial!"

"A greased necktie will fit him!"

It was plain the angry cowboys were satisfied with the proposed method of avenging their comrade.

Several dismounted and lifted Ned Morgan to his feet. The shock of the fall was gradually leaving the young Easterner, and he was soon able to stand without assistance. He was disarmed and his hands were bound behind him. Then the noose of a *riata* encircled his throat in its supple fold and he was dragged along in the midst of the liquor-maddened mob.

Straight toward the nearest tree surged the cowboys, shouting savagely and swearing like pirates. Ned felt that his hour had come, but as the shock he had received passed away he felt himself growing stronger every moment. If his hands had been free he would have made one mad struggle for life, feeling it would be some satisfaction to die fighting; but as it was he could only submit to be led like a lamb to the slaughter.

The tree was soon reached and Ned stood beneath a limb that had often borne human fruit since the founding of Goodenough.

The loose end of the lasso was flung over the limb and every thing was ready for the hanging.

"One minute fer pra'rs," said a pitiless voice.

"Are you men?" cried the young Easterner, his voice ringing out clear and distinct—"or are you wolves? What have I done that I should meet such a fate?"

"Murdered ther whitest boy thet ever roped a steer," was the reply.

"Do you call it murder when one man shoots another in self-defense?"

"Thar wuzn't no self-defense 'bout it," was the retort of the men who were blinded to but one side of the case. "It wuz a clean out an' out murder of ther fu'st degree."

"Right ye are!" shouted Tony Hotcake. "W'at's ther good of wastin' time fer pra'rs? This feller hain't prayin'. Swing him t' oncet, sez I!"

"We'd better finish ther job lively," put in another, "fer ther people of ther place are gittin' tergether mighty thick down ther street thar, an' they may take a notion ter walk inter us red hot."

At that moment a horse and rider were seen approaching through a cloud of dust.

"It's thet derved gal as rode inter town ahead of us," declared one of the cowboys.

"Ready fer ther heave!" shouted a stentorian voice. "All together—now!"

Then came a clatter of hoofs and right into the crowd broke the black horse ridden by the girl called Apache Nan. In a moment horse and rider were beneath the gallows-tree, and clear as the tones of a bell came the cry:

"Hold thar! Drop thet rope or chaw lead!"

With a cocked revolver in each hand the wild,

beautiful girl covered the men who were already beginning to pull at the lariat.

"I mean business," she added, her eyes flashing. "An' w'en I pull trigger suthin' allus drops. I object to this yere leetle hangin' bee."

The cowboys were amazed at the girl's boldness and fascinated by her wild beauty. A perfect queen of tragedy she looked as she faced them there with her long black hair streaming down her back over the round shoulders and her dark eyes gleaming like twin stars, while her red lips were set with a look of determination.

The rope slackened and Ned Morgan was saved for the moment.

"Thet shows yer sense," nodded the girl. "I'd hate ter be obliged ter wipe out this hull crowd, but blame my eyes ef I w'u'dn't 'a' done jest thet ef ye hadn't let up! W'at's ther row anyhow? W'at's this galoot bin at?"

"Murder," was the prompt reply.

"So? An' so ye wuz goin' ter murder him, in turn! Waal, thish yere camp has had about er-nuff o' thet kind o' work. I reckon ye'd better guv ther feller a fair show, which means a trial. He's er right clean lookin' galoot, an' I don't reckon he goes round killin' fer ther fun o' ther thing."

"It is a false charge, miss!" cried Ned. "I did shoot a man, but it was purely in self-defense and only when I was forced to do so unpleasant a thing. If this gang had not caught me foul, I would have died fighting them all."

"Spoken like er man!" exclaimed Apache Nan, a look of admiration flashing across her face. "It's plain you tell ther truth, an' I'm ther gal as stands by ye ter ther last gasp."

"You may as well stan' aside, my gal, fer we're boun' ter hang him anyhow."

"Bet ye two ter one ye don't!" and Nan promptly covered the speaker. "Don't git too familiar, Cap, an' please remember ter reckerlect thet I'm not *your* gal. Ef you try ter swing him, blow me ef I don't wade in an' clean out ther hull derved gang!"

"And if you need any assistance I shall be pleased to offer my services," spoke a calm voice at her side.

Colonel Cool was there.

CHAPTER IX.

NOT EXACTLY DEAD.

WITH a few swift moves the Man from Santa Fe cut the cord which confined Ned Morgan's hands, removed the noose from around his neck and thrust a revolver into his hand. Then he faced the amazed cowboys, showing his milk-white teeth just a bit in a very pleasant smile.

"I must admit," said he, "that it is a fine day for a hanging and it must be a great disappointment to you, gentlemen, to have your fun spoiled in such an aggravating way, but we cannot always have things as we want them in this world of disappointments, so we have to take them as they come. This hanging seems to be a little out of the regular order of things even for a lynching-bee. Come off, boys."

"Waal, now I *will* be derved!"

"Blast my eyes!"

"Whar did it come from?"

"Looker ther hat!"

"An' think of ther *gal*!"

A more astonished set of cowboys it would have been difficult to find in the whole country at that moment. The appearance and bold stand of Apache Nan had taken them aback, but when Colonel Cool "chipped in" they were quite broken up.

As for the Man from Santa Fe it would be difficult to conceive of a person being more at ease than he seemed as he produced an elegant gold-mounted revolver and carefully examined it to make sure it was in perfect working order.

Apache Nan gave a little laugh of satisfaction, as she said:

"Don't reckon I shell need any help, mister, fer 'tain't a tall likely ther boys will cut up rusty; but then, I'm glad ter see *one* man as hain't afeerd o' a passel o' cow-punchers. If Daddy Jim wuz only hyer now we'd be er hull team with a dog under ther cart."

But the cowboys were not ready to give up their victim without a struggle. For the moment they had been stricken motionless by the audacity of the girl and man who had so boldly faced them, but they were rapidly recovering from their amazement, and Colonel Cool scented trouble with a big T.

"Oh, no!" he laughed, "you will not need any help. I have not a doubt concerning your ability to carry through anything you undertake, but I can never refrain from taking a hand in any game that appears a trifle one-sided. Therefore I am here. I should not be a bit surprised if I were followed by half the citizens of Goodenough, for I see they are gathering *en masse* up the street a piece."

A glance up the street showed the cowboys the colonel spoke the truth. The citizens were gathering, all being armed in some manner, and their demonstrations were plainly hostile.

"Derved ef they hain't goin' ter charge us, ther onery fools!" exclaimed one of the cowboys, in amazement.

"Are we goin' ter let ther cuss w'at killed Tom git erway?" demanded a second.

"No, no!" yelled a score of voices.

"String him up, ef we hev ter wipe out ther tall hat galoot with him!"

"How 'bout ther gal?"

"She'd best take a skip."

"Nary skip," cried Nan, shaking her revolvers menacingly. "But ef you fellers try ter crowd me, I'll send some o' ye skippin' ter yer last round-up. Thet's business from ther shoulder!"

"It's no use, boys," nodded Colonel Cool. "You cannot walk over this young lady without you get hurt *bad*, and I advise you to think twice before you try it. All we ask is fair play. If this young fellow has killed one of your pards, let him have a fair trial, and I warrant he shall receive his just deserts. But let me tell you one thing now: There is not enough of your gang present to hang him without a trial."

"Oh, blow yer smooth tongue, an'—"

"Hold on, boys! W'at's thet mean?"

Down the street came three horsemen uttering joyous shouts. The cowboys rubbed their eyes and gazed at them in stupefied amazement.

"It's Nubby Stone," said one.

"An' Big Zeb," declared another.

"They stayed behind ter look arter Tom," muttered the one called Tony Hotcake.

"But thet other! Dang my ole eyes—it's—"

"It's Tom!" howled twenty voices.

And so it was. Holy Terror Tom was not dead, by any means! What a yell of delight went up from his amazed comrades as he joined them near the tree! How they crowded around him, and all tried to get hold of his hands at once!

"Let up, boys!" he laughed. "I'm all right. What are you making such a fuss over me for?"

"Reckoned you'd cro'ed," laughed Tony Hotcake. "Ther feller as drapped ye came blessed near bein' hung fer yer murder."

"Murder?" exclaimed Tom, the laugh fading from his face. "Did you say murder, Tony?"

"Thet's what I did."

"But, there wasn't any murder about it, and would not have been if I had received his bullet in my heart instead of in the little locket in which I have carried my mother's picture all these years. It spoiled locket and picture, and stopped my heart doing business in its regular way for a time, but the locket saved my life. It was a fair fight, and would have been no murder if there had been no locket to shield me."

"I had no desire to kill you, Tom," declared Ned. "You forced me to do what I did, and I fired blindly on the excitement of the moment. I have no grudge against you."

Holy Terror Tom looked fixedly at the son of his old enemy for several seconds. Once he opened his lips as if to speak, but he repressed the desire and turned abruptly away.

"It looks like ther critters are comin' at us pretty soon," observed one of the cowboys, glancing a bit nervously toward where the citizens were gathering in the street. "There's a right good lot of 'em, too."

A short consultation was held, and they decided to leave the town without an encounter with the indignant people. They had "taken the town," and obtained drinks at the saloon, which satisfied them for that day.

"But we've got ter go back through ther place," said Tony Hotcake.

"Yes," laughed Tom, "we will run the gantlet and take our chances. If we do so now, I do not think they will oppose us; but if we stay here longer, they will attack us, and we shall have to fight."

Then, as they rode away, he turned again to Ned Morgan and said:

"You and I will meet again."

Like a whirlwind the reckless cowboy led his followers up the street, every man yelling and shooting as wildly as when they entered the place. The citizens seemed inclined to block their road at first, but as the howling mass came nearer they wavered, broke and ran for cover.

A few ineffectual shots were sent after the wild gang as it swept past, then the people flocked into the street and made a pretense of pursuing the party.

Straight on out of town rode the cowboys, and the delighted citizens shook hands with each other and laughed over the easy manner in which they had driven the "cow-punchers." It was considered a great victory, and everybody felt like taking "something" over it. In a very short time the saloons were doing a rushing business once more, the streets were thronged, and the music and dancing was resumed within the Wanderer's Home as if nothing had happened to mar the pleasure of the occasion.

When the cowboys had ridden away, Apache Nan looked round for Colonel Cool, but the Man from Santa Fe had disappeared. However, she saw Ned Morgan leaning against the tree, looking very white and weak.

"What's ther matter?" she asked, quickly sliding down from the back of the black horse.

"Are you hurt?"

"I think I am somewhat," he replied, making

a feeble attempt to smile. "I got a bullet in the shoulder when they were chasing me."

A glance showed her blood had run down and dripped from the ends of his fingers. In his right hand he still clutched the revolver which Colonel Cool had thrust into his fingers.

"Ther cowardly whelp!" cried Nan, in sudden rage. "It is good fer some o' them they hain't hyer now! Hyer, let me take thet pop. Now you set down with yer back to the tree—so, I'll have a look at ther wound."

With a keen knife she quickly cut open his coat and shirt sleeves, exposing the injured shoulder.

"Tain't very bad, I reckon," she said, with a little sigh of relief. "It's bled right smart an' thet's w'at mecks ye feel sort o' weak an' fainty. I'll bind it up jest as it is, an' w'en we git ter ther shanty, I'll wash it clean an' do it over. Let me hev yer han'kershift."

In a few moments she had bound up the wound in a rude manner so the flow of blood would be greatly checked.

"Now," she declared, decisively, "you've got ter go with me ter ther shanty whar I kin do ther job as it sh'd ought ter be did. Don't ye kick, fer 'twon't do a bit o' good. Ef you stays in Goodenough, you'll l'arn thet Apache Nan's word is good as law hyer, an' no man dar's say enny differ'nt."

Ned laughed a little.

"Then I shall have to submit."

"Thet's jest right. Glad ter see ye so sensible like. Reckon I an' you won't hev no quarrel. Think ye kin git onter thish yere boss?"

"I can try."

With Nan's assistance, he succeeded in mounting the horse. She would not listen when he protested it was his place to walk and hers to ride.

"You jest keep still an' do as I tells ye ef you know w'en you're well off," she laughed. "I'm bossin' this yere business."

Then whistling for the horse to follow her, she led the way down the trail till it struck the stream. She crossed the water by jumping from stone to stone with all the grace and agility of a sure-footed mountain goat. Ned watched her with wonder as the horse followed through the water, for never before in all his life had he seen a girl like her—so wild, so odd and illiterate, yet so beautiful and full of grace.

Beyond the stream they ascended the slope, climbing a somewhat difficult path, till they came to an old cabin set in a picturesque spot which commanded a fine view of the valley below and the busy little town of Goodenough.

"Thar," said the girl, with a wave of one brown little hand, "you kin tumble off now. We stop hyer."

CHAPTER X.

NAN AND NED.

NED was glad to get off the horse and follow his new friend into the cabin, for he felt weak and longed to lie down. She seemed to understand with womanly intuition just how he felt, and as soon as they were within the hut, she pointed to a rude couch, saying:

"You kin lay down thar. I'll look arter your hurt fu'st thing."

"But your horse," objected the young man, as he sunk down with a sigh of relief. "You have left the animal loose at the door."

"Oh, Midnight's all right. He'll stay roun' tell I find time to look arter him. Your wound is a heap sight more 'portant jest now."

She had him remove his coat and lie down, then she brought a dish of cool water, removed the handkerchief and bathed the shoulder and arm, washing away all the clotted blood. She examined the wounds closely and nodded her head with satisfaction when she saw it was not worse than she had thought at first.

"'Twon't bother ye skeerely none ter speak on," she said. "I hain't lived 'mong ther 'Paches fer northin', an' I know jest w'at ter putt on thet. You jest hold thish yere wet cloth on thar tell I come back."

In another moment she darted out at the cabin door.

Nan was not absent long, and when she returned she brought some green leaves in her hands. These she proceeded to bruise and partially crush between two stones, after which she once more bathed Ned's wounded shoulder and then applied the beaten leaves and bound them on.

The young man watched her with admiration, for there was much that was fascinating about the wild, handsome face, and every movement was pleasant to see.

"You're a charming little nurse," he declared, with genuine admiration. "I wish when I am ill I may always have such an attendant."

Quick as a flash Nan's face turned crimson, but she looked pleased.

"Oh, it hain't northin'," she faltered, as she completed the task of making the bandages secure. "I l'arn how ter docter some w'en I was with ther Injuns."

"With the Indians!" repeated Ned. "When was that?"

"Why, don't you know? 'Course ye don't, w'at am I thinkin' on! I lived with ther 'Patchys six y'ars."

"How did it happen? Tell me about it."

"Wal," said Nan, half-reclining on the floor in a graceful attitude as she looked up into his eyes, "thar hain't much ter tell 'cept thet my pap an' mom wuz killed by ther 'Patchys w'en I wuz er little shaver 'bout so tall," holding up one hand to illustrate. "They didn't kill me fer some reason or ruther, but kerried me off ter ther tribe whar I become a reg'lar slave fer ther ole chief's squaw. I l'arn lots o' their ways, an' I reckon I kin talk 'Patchy now better 'n I kin United States."

"But, how did you get away?" Ned eagerly asked. "Go on! I am deeply interested."

"Oh, I wuz allus thinkin' o' gittin' away, an' once or twice I tried it, but w'en I wuz ketched I got such a poundin' thet I wuz tarnal nigh kilt. They said they w'd kill me outright ef I tried it ag'in, an' so I hed ter guv it up. But one time ther band I wuz with went on a stealin' raid an' wuz pursued by er big party o' whites. They didn't keer much for whites, fer they'd allus bin able ter git away from them slick as grease, but they didn't know thar wuz er man called Ole Socorro Jim leadin' ther pursuers thet time. Ef they had, they'd bin more keerful like, fer he wuz know'd an' feared by them."

"Wal, one night w'en ever'body wuz sleepin' 'cept one or two as wuz keepin' guard, ther fu'st ther 'Patches knew thar wuz a yell, an' er volley o' shots, nen ther whites jumped up right whar they'd crep' in on 'em. I tell you thar wuz hot times then!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing at the remembrance. "Ther braves wuz ketched foul, but they fit like a passil o' mad wolves. It wuzn't a reg'lar war-party, only jest a stealin' party thet hed gone whar they thought they w'dn't git in no trouble, but they made a mistake. You bet yer boots I wuz 'most tickled ter death w'en I saw they wuz ketched."

"It didn't take ther whites long ter git in 'monst ther wigwams an' commence settin' 'em afire. W'en I see'd w'at they wuz doin', I grabbed a stick from ther fire an' went ter touchin' off ther tepees myself. It wuz jolly fun ter see 'em blaze, an' ther light helped ther whites. But ther ole chief's squaw saw w'at I wuz up to an' kem at me with a hatchet. She ketched me by ther ha'r an' guv an awful yell as she swung ther tomahawk ter split open my skull. I reckoned my goose wuz cooked 'bout thet time, but jest then I saw an ole man as had a dead bead on ther squaw, an' afore she c'd crack me with ther hatchet he shot her through ther head."

"Wal, ther eend o' it wuz thet w'at reds didn't run wuz killed an' ther white men wuz ther victers. At fu'st they tuck me fer er leetle Injun, but I soon convinced 'em I wuz pure white every time. W'en I tole my story ther ole man as shot ther squaw an' saved my life claimed me as his gal. It wuz Ole Socorro Jim. As my own folks wuz dead, I didn't make enny 'jections, you bet, fer I liked ther ole feller fu'st squint. An' so I become his gal an' have lived with him 'most all ther time ever since, an' ef ever thar wuz a good man in all thish yere worl' it's Ole Daddy Jim."

"Is that all?"

"Yep, thet's all."

"Well, I must say that is a very wild and romantic story indeed. You have had a wonderful life thus far, and not a very pleasant one I imagine, Miss—Miss—Excuse me, I do not know your name."

"It's Nan."

"Nan what?"

"Oh, jest Nan's good enough. Some call me Apache Nan."

"But, what was the name of your parents?"

"I—I—don't remember," she stammered, again turning crimson. "Daddy's back-door name's Crocker. You might call me Nan Crocker ef you wanted to very bad."

"All right, Miss Crocker, it shall—"

"Oh, say," cried the girl, abruptly, half-laughing, "that won't do a tall! I reckon you hadn't better call me Crocker arter all, an' as fer ther Miss part thet's too steep. Don't tack it onter my handle please."

"But what do you want me to call you?"

"Nan'll do; call me Nan."

"All right, if you will not think it too familiar, Nan it shall be."

"An' w'at shall I call you?" she asked, glancing up at him and then allowing her large black eyes to fall before his half-amused gaze.

"My name is Ned Morgan."

"Thank ye. It's plain you're from ther States, Mr. Morgan."

"Hold on!" he cried, quickly. "If I am to call you Nan, you must call me Ned. Is it agreed?"

"Yep," she nodded, laughing again in her artless way.

"Then shake on it," extending his right hand.

She put her little brown fingers into his, and once more a blush tinged her sun-tanned face. Ned fancied he felt her hand tremble in his grasp, and of a sudden he relinquished it, set-

ting back on the couch as a look of pain swept for a single second across his handsome face.

The sharp-eyed girl noticed the sudden change and started up in anxious alarm, asking quickly:

"W'at is it—yer shoulder?"

He shook his head.

"No, my shoulder is all right, thanks to you."

"But you looked like suthin' hurt ye."

"Something did."

"W'at wuz it?"

"My thoughts."

"Oh!"

She sunk back and stared at him in a manner that would not have been considered well-bred in polite society, but just then he did not seem to mind it, for of a sudden his thoughts had wandered to other scenes. A sad dreamy look rested on his face and filled the girl with a strange feeling of awe. For several minutes she was motionless and silent, then she slowly and noiselessly arose and went softly out of the cabin. Still the young man lay on the couch quite unconscious that she had moved.

When Nan re-entered the cabin thirty minutes later Old Socorro Jim was with her.

"Waal, waal!" exclaimed the old scout, as his eyes rested on the reclining figure of Ned Morgan. "So you are the young tenderfoot as my leetle gal hes bin tellin' me of? She sez ye kem pritty tarnal nigh gittin' yer walkin'-papers from them thar cowboys."

"Which is the truth," said Ned, arising with outstretched hand, which was grasped by Jim. "But for her bravery I would be an excellent subject for a funeral now."

The old man's eyes sparkled with admiration as he turned them on the girl.

"She's er Jo-daisy, is Nan?" he nodded. "She's allus 'round jest w'en she's wanted. I tell ye w'at, stranger, she's jest ther blamedest best gal as ever drored a breath—you hear me!"

"Thar, thar, Daddy!" cried Nan, again getting quite red. "Hain't I guv ye fair warnin' twenty times? Jest you be keerful ef you don't want me ter keep my word an' desert ye quite."

At this Old Jim chuckled and nodded and winked in the most comical manner as if enjoying himself hugely.

"Hain't she a spit-fire!" he laughed, shutting one eye very tightly and distorting the side of his face as if trying to see how bad he could make his features look. "Oh, she's a regular cat! Thet's w'at she is—a cat! He! he! he! She's purty slick-lookin' an' peert, but she's got claws!"

Then the queer old fellow forced Ned down on the couch again and sat down on a rude stool near at hand. And as he filled and lighted an old cob pipe, he plied the young Easterner with a thousand and one questions.

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

IT soon became evident to Old Jim that the young man did not wish to reveal the nature of his business in Goodenough. He did not deny having reasons for coming to the wild little camp; indeed, he claimed to have the strongest reasons for his visit. But, whatever they were, he kept them to himself.

Still Ned answered the most of the old fellow's questions frankly, and Jim soon became convinced that the tenderfoot was a "galoot ter tie to."

Ned talked freely of his trouble with the wild young cowboy, and told the scout of Tom Hayward's record in his native town, Corydon. He said he had no hard feelings against Hayward, and believed the reckless youth would not have forced him into the shooting affray had he not been excited by drink.

"Tom was not a very bad boy, as I remember him," added Ned, "but he was always full of his wild pranks. The other boys liked him and looked on him as a sort of leader, but the older people of Corydon could not tolerate him. His reckless thoughtlessness made him many enemies among them, and my father was one of the most bitter. Father was a stern man, but he intended to be strictly just. Tom had trouble of some kind with Cy Bent and swore he would get even. Bent was cordially hated by all the boys, but Tom went too far when he set fire to the man's buildings. He was brought before my father and given a term of years, but he managed to escape and was supposed to have died in Florida during a yellow fever epidemic. It was all a trick of his to put his enemies at rest. We met to-day, and he sought revenge on my father by shooting me."

"But he tackled ther wrong chick, eh?" grinned Old Jim, hunching his rounded shoulders in an odd manner. "Nan said you spotted him right whar he lived, but suthin' he had in his pocket stopped ther lead."

"Yes, I came near killing him, and I thank God that locket stopped my bullet! I want no human blood on my hands if I can avoid it."

"Purty blamed hard thing ter do in thish yere kentry. Feller jest has ter shoot a man oncet or twicet in a while ur ther natives will crawl all over him. 'Twon't never do ter let 'em think they kin trod on ye, fer ef ye do, they'll take 'vantage o' it uvery blamed time."

But Nan said she hed er leetle help in stan'in off ther cow-punchers."

"Yes, some one freed my hands, threw off the noose and slipped this revolver into my hand. I was so dazed that I did not see his face very distinctly, but I think it was the same neatly-dressed man that was engaged in the duel when the cowboys appeared in town."

"I reckoned 'twuz him from w'at Nan said. Calls hisself Kunnel Cool, an' ther name fits him ur Big Fist Mose is a howlin' liar. I reckoned Mose had stretched ther truth sevarial p'intz tell I saw ther tall-bat critter shoot over his shoulder with thet thar bit o' lookin'-glass ter aim by an' knock ther hammer off ther Crusher's gun. Mose says he kin do thet leetle trick uvery derned time an' not hafe try. Right clean-lookin' gun he guv ye."

"Yes, it is a beauty. I shall return it the first chance I get. For some reason I fancy I have seen that man somewhere before, and his face impresses me unpleasantly."

"Purty good-lookin' galoot."

"Yes, he is a fine-looking man, but I feel almost certain he is a villain for all of his outward appearance. There is something smooth and oily about him that makes me think of a snake."

"He seemed purty ready ter chip in an' help ye w'en ye wuz in a tight corner."

"That is true, and it may be that I am wronging him in thinking he is anything but a gentleman. He has put me in his debt, although I do not think Miss Nan needed any of his aid just then. She appeared to be having things pretty much her own way."

At this Nan, who was busy spreading the table, turned and shook her head, pretending to be offended, but half-laughing as she said:

"Careful, sir! If you go fer ter hitch on a Miss then you become Mister. Remember ther 'greement."

"I beg pardon," smiled Ned. "I am very thoughtless, Nan."

"Thet's better, Ned," was her quick response.

Socorro Jim suddenly became very grave, looking from one to the other with an anxious expression on his honest face. There was something in this sudden familiarity of which he did not approve, but he spoke no word then. The time was to come, however, when he would free his mind. After this he sat smoking in silence till the girl called them to prepare for "fodder."

Jim showed Ned a bucket of water, and when both had washed they sat down at the rough table, which was not covered by a cloth of any kind, but the young man saw at a glance that the food was not so very bad and everything appeared neat and clean. The savory smell of venison and coffee redoubled his hunger, and the cool breeze which swept in at the open door and out by a window served to counterbalance the heat from the fire which Nan had been obliged to kindle.

It must be confessed that the table manners of this rude people were not governed by any established rules, but for all of that, there was a certain charming grace about everything said or done by Nan that smoothed and made pleasant the rudest things. To Ned she seemed a genuine child of nature.

Gradually Old Jim became talkative and merry once more. The food and coffee brought out the jolly side of his nature, and he cracked rude jokes and chuckled in his odd way. After teasing Nan till she was ready to burst into angry tears, he took another tack and praised her cooking and her "natural smartness" till she blushed and smiled with pleasure.

"I tell ye w'at," he cried, emphatically, "I'm one o' ther luckiest ole sinners as ever lived ter hev sech er gal. She's bin better ter me then any own darter ginerally is ter her daddy, an' I want ye to know I 'preciate it. Young feller, I'm givin' ye straight Gospel w'en I say thet thar leetle rosebud is a holy screamer."

At this modest compliment the girl turned still more fiery red and shook her dark head violently as she declared:

"Now this is jest ther last time I'll stan' thish yere kind o' a racket, you hear thet! Fu'st you blow me up an' nen you turn roun' an' kiver me all over with soft-soap. Daddy, you're a double-faced ole fraud, thet's w'at!"

Then Jim lay back and came near falling to the floor so violent was his laughter.

"Ho-ho! he-he!" he gasped, rubbing his hands together with great enjoyment. "Didn't I tole ye she wuz a spit-fire! Jest looker them black eyes snap! Oh, dear me! oh, dear me! W'at a gal! w'at a gal!"

Then he swiftly became sober, adding earnestly:

"I don't s'pose I orter plague her, but then she knows ther ole man don't mean nothin', don't ye, Nan? We get along fu'st rate, only she will try to pull out a han'ful o' my ole gray ha'r, sometimes. Thinks I hain't gittin' bald-headed fast enough I reckon. Ther man as gits her better keep his wool sheared close."

"Thar you go ag'in!" warned the girl. "Take keer, take keer, Daddy!"

"I can't help it," the old fellow asserted.

"W'en I gits full it will spill over. Ef I sh'u'd

say w'at I mean it'd be to ther 'fect thet ther lucky man'd git a di'mint o' the fu'st water. I'm gittin' purty ole an' kan't 'spect ter stay with my little gal allus, so I sha'n't feel so very bad ef she gits some nice feller, but while I live ther chap as gits her better treat her as she d'sarves—thet's like er queen. It'll be er sorry job fer ther critter as plays her crooked! I'd shoot him like a snake!"

"You needn't worry, Daddy," declared Nan. "I kin take keer o' number one. 'Sides thet, I'm satisfied jest as I am, an' I hain't goin' to leave you in ther lurch yet awhile."

The meal passed off pleasantly, after which Old Jim again resorted to his pipe. Ned offered the old man a cigar, but he declined it, asserting he liked the pipe better. The young man lit a cigar, and together they enjoyed a smoke and another chat.

Thus the day slipped away, Ned remaining at the cabin at the urgent request of the man and girl. It was a pleasant day for him despite his narrow escape from being hanged—much pleasanter than he had dreamed of enjoying in the place when he entered Goodenough. He took his turn at questioning the old man, and gleaned a large amount of information about the camp and its inhabitants. But for some reason he was the most interested in Jim's description of the Lucky Pards and their doings since coming to the place.

"I must see those two wonderful individuals," he declared; "and I believe I will go down into camp when it becomes cooler, toward night."

Efforts to dissuade him were useless; so, just at dusk, the two men left the cabin together, Nan standing in the doorway to see them off and waving her hand when Ned turned and glanced back through the gathering darkness. He waved his hat in reply and passed on down the slope.

The lights of Goodenough were beginning to twinkle as they approached the place. On the outskirts they saw a closely veiled woman hastening swiftly through the dusky shadows. Just as she was passing a dark cabin a man sprung out from where he was crouching by the wall and seized her.

"Help!"

Her sharp cry was quickly answered by two voices, and Jim and Ned sprung toward the struggling figures. It was plain the woman's assailant had not seen them before, for he uttered a furious oath of disgust.

"Drop her, you cur!" shouted Ned.

"Yes, drap her ur I'll drap you!" shrilly piped the old scout, jerking out a ready revolver.

The wretch obeyed and promptly took to his heels. Socorro Jim sent several bullets whistling past his ears, which caused the baffled ruffian to redouble his exertions and soon disappear behind a building.

With natural gallantry, Ned Morgan had promptly sprung to the lady's side.

"I hope that creature has not injured you, madam. If he has, he shall—"

He stopped suddenly and reeled back a step with a strange cry. In the struggle the lady's veil had been torn away, and, at sound of the young Easterner's voice she gave a gasp and turned toward him a very white face. In an instant his face also became white, and for several seconds they stared at each other in utter silence as if each saw a ghost.

"Ned!"

"Mina!"

Almost in the same breath they uttered the name, then the woman turned and ran swiftly away through the gathering gloom.

For an instant Ned stared after her, then he bounded away in pursuit.

CHAPTER XII. A PIERCED HEART.

"DERN my skin!"

Socorro Jim stared in amazement at the vanishing figure of his late companion. The woman had already disappeared. In a few seconds Ned dashed round the corner of a cabin in pursuit and the old man was left alone, the still smoking revolver clutched in his hand.

"Dern my skin!" he repeated. "Ef thet don't jest beat ther ole-fashioned Dutch!"

For several moments he continued to stare into the gloom, then he began to reload his revolver, muttering to himself:

"I'd jest like ter know w'at thet means anyhow. Reckon them two has seen each other afore. By gash! I'm beginning ter get my ole eyes open a bittle dit," mixing his words slightly as he became suddenly excited by the thought that flashed through his mind. "Thet young feller's hyer on a gal hunt, thet's jest w'at! He w'u'dn't say w'at he kem ter Goodenough fer, but I understan' it all now. Waal, waal!"

Having reloaded the revolver, he started to follow and find the young Easterner, but it was not long before he decided it was folly to go skulking round through the town looking for the missing one.

"Like as not some feller'd take me fer a target," he said, stopping to gaze around. "Sech a thing w'u'dn't be a tall s'prisin' in this town. Tain't healthy ter prowler roun' these tents an' shanties. Young feller's got er gun an' kin

prob'ly take keer o' hisself fer all o' thet leetle snatched on ther shoulder. He'll most likely turn up later, so I'll jest drap inter ther Wanderer's Home, to which we wuz p'intin'."

Jim no sooner stepped in through the door of the saloon than he felt himself caught up from the floor as if he were a child and hugged to a brawny breast till he was nearly smothered.

"Dad burn it tall!" he squealed, kicking and squirming like an eel till he was free. "Who in holy thunder durst snoop down on Jim Crocker in thish yere way? I'll blow him—Hello, Moses! is it you?"

"It is I, be not afraid," was the big fellow's majestic reply, accompanied by a broad sweep of one huge hand. "Put up your pop-gun, Jimmy, lad, an' come play fish at the bar."

"I'm blamed ef I hain't a good mind ter bore ye," declared the angry old man. "I believe I'll give ye an almighty lickin' anyhow."

At this Big Fist uttered a hoarse shout of laughter. When he seemed able to control his merriment, he said:

"Fear comes upon me: oh, much I fear some ill, unlucky thing! Great chowder! You believe you will give me an almighty licking, do ye? Well, that takes the dumpling!"

"Moses," cried Jim, in disgust, "you have been drinkin'! Thet saves your skin fer ther present, fer I don't want ter git inter no drunken brawl. Reckon I'll wait tell you git sober 'fore I whale ye."

The old man restored his revolver to its proper place of repose and was about to walk away when the giant caught him by the arm.

"Come, old man, a joke is a joke. It was me delight at once more beholding you that caused me to thus deport myself. Come up and absorb."

"No, thankee; I'm not drinkin' anythin' ter-night. As fer you, I reckon you've killed enough o' ther rotten stuff fer ther time. Hadn't ye better let up? Yer breath has got er muscle ekal to ole Samson's."

"Base wretch!" hissed the big fellow, striking an attitude. "Dare thou hint I am intoxicated? By me head! I will cleave thee in twain!"

"Oh, do choke off!" grunted Jim. "You make me sick ter my stummie!"

Big Fist glared at the little man for several seconds, then shook his head in a mournful manner.

"He fears me not," with mock sadness, clasping his huge hands and dropping his head in a pensive attitude. "How lowly are the mighty fallen!"

Once more Jim turned away, but Big Fist was quickly at his side.

"Whither travelst, honored sir?" he asked.

"I beg privilege to journey with thee."

"Waal, come erlong, but fer heavin's sake talk sense! I don't want people ter think I'm runnin' with er blowed fool now'days."

Although it was early, the Wanderer's Home was already well filled with the same motley crowd that patronized the place during the day. The bar was doing a thriving business, the gambling tables were well taken, the faro layout was raking in the "skids," and the sound of music and shuffling feet still came from the dance hall.

Socorro Jim paused and looked around.

"There he is, right over there, sitting all alone at a table," said Mose, catching the little man by the shoulder and partially turning him round. "Do you see him?"

"Who? W'at are ye drivin' at?"

"Why, Colonel Cool, of course. You must be looking for him. He is the celebrity of the camp at the present time."

"W'at's he done ter make hisself so prominent?" demanded Jim, surveying the Man from Santa Fe, who was sitting with his elbow resting on the table in front of him, heedlessly twirling the ends of his fine mustache.

"Done! Why, hast not heard? He has been making a record since his appearance in town. For some reason he seems to have plenty of enemies here, but he minds them as he would a flock of blackbirds. Reuben the Crusher was not satisfied with the result of the duel, so he caught the colonel inside the bar-room here, after the cowboys departed, and attempted to give him a regular punching, in Sullivan style."

"W'at wuz ther result?"

"Disaster for the Crusher. The colonel did him up in fine style in less than three minutes, and when the job was over he did not look warm or excited in the least. He smiled as sweet as you please as Reuben's friends sacked him off in an unconscious condition. Then when he asked everybody to smile with him, there was a general rush for the bar. James, I am giving you Gospel when I declare that that there Colonel Cool is what vulgar people would designate as a rip-snorter."

"Ef he knocked out ther Crusher I sh'u'd say so. He must be er reg'ler terror with his dukes."

"It is wisdom thy tongue doth declare," and Mose once more assumed a dramatic attitude. "Me noble bosom swells with admiration when I think of yonder wonderful human. He has the muscles of a Samson, the eye of an eagle, the heart of a lion, the— By chowder, Jim! he's a lulu!"

"Ther Crusher has had things pretty much his own way in this camp sence he struck hyer. People has bin 'feered ter cross him in ary way, an' I reckon more nor one will be glad ter know his reign is ended. Your Kunnel Cool hes done one good act in his life, at least."

"But hold on, dear James; I have not told you all. The colonel has had still further adventures since he shot away the hammer of the revolver in Reuben's hand. Adventures thrilling and otherwise in their nature. A foul assassin didst dare strike a knife at his back!"

"W'at's thet? Say, ef ther stuff you hev' bin drinkin' hes flew ter—"

"Hold! I scorn your insinuations! There is not enough tanglefoot in this yere town to affect my brain. I am giving you straight goods."

"Then go on."

"It was while they were drinking at the bar, laughing and congratulating the colonel over his victory, that Juan Gomez, a Mexican, crept up behind him and tried to drive a knife into his back. The colonel's old friend, the mirror behind the bar, again saved his life. He saw the Mexican dog lift his arm. In an instant he threw his half-uplifted glass of liquor, glass and all, over his shoulder into the face and eyes of the treacherous dog, blinding and astonishing the dastard. Before Gomez could carry out his murderous intention Colonel Cool whirled, seizing him by the throat with one hand and wrenching the knife from his grasp with the other. Those who witnessed the whole thing allowed it was the cleanest, quickest and slickest piece of work that ever fell beneath their notice."

"Waal, by gum!" exclaimed the old man. "I reckon he *must* be a holy screamer!"

At this Big Fist nodded in great satisfaction.

"I told you so, Jimmy, at the start, but you thought I was lying. But the worst of the whole thing was the way the colonel laughed in the Mexican's face as if it all had been a great joke. The Greaser was half-scared to death, but after holding him still a moment, Cool gave him back his knife, bade him good-day and calmly turned his back on the treacherous whelp."

"Holy thunder!"

"Gospel again, James. Juan Gomez was as amazed as any one, and he took the first chance to sneak out of the vicinity."

At this moment there was a commotion close at hand, followed by some loud words, then two men were seen struggling in the midst of a crowd that surged toward the gambling tables.

As if quite unconcerned, Colonel Cool watched the swaying mass approach till it was close at hand. Even when there appeared to be immediate danger of the struggling men crowding upon him he did not rise.

Suddenly there was a little glittering flash before his eyes and something struck on the table with a soft thud.

A few moments later the mob was dispersed by Uncle Jerry.

Then glancing down at the table the Man from Santa Fe saw a small dagger standing quivering before him, the point piercing a piece of paper on which was stamped a crimson heart!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COLONEL DANCES.

WAS it possible Colonel Cool started a bit and a shade of pallor swept across his handsome face for an instant? It seemed so, but—Nonsense! Why should a bit of paper on which was stamped a crimson heart startle a man of ice with nerves of steel? Why should it startle him even if the paper was pinned to the table before him by a tiny dagger that pierced the very center of the crimson heart?

The Man from Santa Fe lay back in his chair, concealing a well-bred yawn with one shapely white hand. He seemed somewhat bored by his surroundings, and a look of mild disgust settled on his face as he watched Uncle Jerry quell the excitement and notify the authors of it to "make themselves absent."

Finally, the colonel drew out a cigar case and selected a weed. Reaching out lazily, he removed the small dagger from the table and carefully clipped off the point of the cigar with the keen instrument. With a little flip, he tossed it back on the table, where it again struck point down and stood quivering once more.

How carelessly indifferent and unstudied seemed the man's every move!

Picking up the piece of paper on which was the blood-red heart that had been pierced by the dagger's keen point he slowly twisted it into a little spiral and doubled the end so it would not untwist, thus making an old lady's "economy match."

A genuine match was the next requisite and was taken from a silver match-case. Striking the match, he lighted the coil of paper, and then proceeded very leisurely to light his cigar with the latter.

When the little job was accomplished to his entire satisfaction, he blew out the tiny blaze and tossed the end of the "economy match" down on the sawdust beside his feet. Then, as he blew out tiny rings of smoke apparently without making an effort to do so, he resumed

his occupation of watching the restless surge of the crowd and listening to the Babel of their voices.

If any one had watched Colonel Cool expecting he would betray emotion at sight of the dagger-pierced heart they must have been greatly disappointed.

Calmly the Man from Santa Fe smoked his fragrant cigar, his eyes roving listlessly over the moving mass in the vicinity of the bar and occasionally glancing at the men gathered at the deal-tables. He did not appear watching for any one, but was evidently killing time as best he could.

After a time, seeming tired of sitting still, he arose and sauntered over to the faro-table, where he stood watching the play in an uninterested way for ten or fifteen minutes.

"*Por Dios!*" exclaimed a dark-faced Spanish-Mexican, who had been fighting recklessly against a run of bad luck. "I am, as you say, cleaned out. No more to-night can I play. *Hasta la mananda adios.*" (Till to-morrow farewell.)

As he arose wrapping his crimson *serape* around him, Colonel Cool slipped into his seat with a smiling word of thanks. He purchased a hundred dollars worth of chips of the bank, and then lay back to watch the play, making his bets as his best judgment dictated during the deal. The disgusted Mexican's bad luck did not cling to the seat he had vacated, for the Man from Santa Fe won every four bets out of five at the start, and continued to do so for some time.

"This is evidently your night, sir," said the dealer, scowling a bit as the quiet man continued to pile up the chips.

But Colonel Cool shook his head.

"I beg your pardon," with suave politeness, "but I am quite certain it is not. If I thought so, I should play a little stiffer game. It is a bad thing for me if I win on the start and stick by the game, for I am sure to get badly left at the end. Dame Fortune is coaxing me a little just now, but presently you will see the treacherous jade give me the cold shoulder."

He was right. It finally came about that he lost three bets in succession, and he said very coolly:

"My luck has turned."

He only made one more bet, and the dealer raked that in. Then he cashed his chips and left the table three hundred dollars ahead for the few minutes he had spent there.

For a few minutes he seemed undecided what to do, but the sounds of music, laughter and shuffling feet, with now and then a shout from some enthusiastic tripper of the "light fantastic" brought him to a conclusion, and he turned toward the dance-hall.

He found the place filled with as strange and varied a collection of human beings as one could wish to see. There was nothing "select" about the dance-apartment of the Wanderer's Home, and for men there was a mixed assembly quite similar in appearance to that which filled the room the colonel had just left. Many nations were represented, for there were Americans, Mexicans, Irishmen, negroes, etc., on the floor, and in one corner two jubilant and excited old Indian chiefs were indulging in a "war-dance," locked fast in each other's arms.

Instead of being disgusted with what he saw, the Man from Santa Fe looked on with a smile. He was used to such scenes, and the sight did not affect him as it might one with sensitive nerves who had never witnessed anything but an assembly of "fashion's pets," the *gentlemen* scrupulously attired in dress suits and the *ladies* modestly wearing exceedingly low *corsages*.

It was plain at a glance there were too many men in the dance hall of the Wanderer's—or else there were not enough of the gentler sex—for not a few of the rough fellows whose blood had been stirred by the enlivening strains of music were on the floor dancing "gander fashion."

In a moment Colonel Cool noticed a peculiar thing about the females present. At least one-half of them wore masks or veils which concealed their features. Many of those who were unmasked carried their names on their painted faces indelibly stamped there by lives they had led—lives of crookedness which had stained their wayward souls forever black.

The Man from Santa Fe could not peer beneath the veils of those who chose to keep their faces concealed, but many of them he scanned closely and decided they were not all of one class. Indeed, he more than half believed there were some very respectable girls in the room, and he fancied he understood why they were permitted to hide their faces if they wished.

Even in a new town like Goodenough there were many respectable women and girls, for the old California mining days when a woman was a great curiosity in the gold camps were forever past. Those of the gentler sex who found themselves in the wild camps were forced to mingle with and come in contact with the rough people of the mines, and if they enjoyed any recreation it would perforce be such as their surroundings offered.

Colonel Cool saw that the proprietor of the Wanderer's Home had been quite shrewd in making it possible for women and girls of the

town who did not wish to be known in such a place to visit the dance hall *en masque* so they could not be recognized. It was a novel idea and added an air of mystery to the gayety of the dances which was quite fascinating and led thither many a man who would not have cared to patronize the place ordinarily.

The colonel soon observed a veiled woman advancing toward him. She was dressed entirely in black and wore a garment which must have been the handiwork of a good dressmaker, for it was very tasty, not to say stylish, and showed the elegant figure of the wearer to its best advantage. The lady wore a broad-brimmed black hat with a curling feather which served to give her the least bit of a dashing appearance. Her hands were concealed by gloves, and there was no display of jewelry about her person.

"By Jove!" breathed the colonel. "A handsome figure that, and if there is not a handsome face behind that veil I am not myself."

There was no excitement about his manner and it scarcely seemed he had observed the veiled unknown at all. He did not stare at her, for he was too well-bred, but he managed to watch her moves in a quiet and apparently uninterested manner.

As she came forward the veiled lady glanced around in an anxious manner as if looking for some one. Of a sudden when she was not far from the colonel, a brawny, red-shirted, rough-looking fellow stepped in front of her and spoke to her. She started back as if in alarm.

From that moment the Man from Santa Fe became outwardly interested, making no effort to conceal the fact that he was regarding the veiled unknown and her apparently unwelcome companion.

It was plain the fellow was urging the lady to dance with him, and it was equally plain she did not wish to do so. But he was not ready to take no for an answer and boldly insisted that she *must* favor him. In anger she attempted to pass him, but he caught her rudely by the wrist, saying:

"Don't be in sich er mighty hurry, my dear. You are not goin' tell you give me thet waltz."

But at that instant he felt the back of his neck clutched by what appeared to be fingers of steel which threatened to crush their way through flesh and bone. In his ear a smooth, pleasant voice murmured:

"My dear sir, will you kindly favor me by releasing the lady's wrist."

Uttering an oath of pain and amazement, the fellow was not slow in obeying the command, for command it was though spoken in such a singular manner. The hand that was reaching for a weapon dropped at the man's side as his eyes rested on the placid, smiling face of his assailant.

"Thank you," and the colonel's white teeth gleamed out for a bit, as he released the fellow and bowed gracefully. "You are at liberty to move on now, sir."

The man had seen Colonel Cool meet the Crusher both times and had also witnessed the singular affair between the quiet man and Juan Gomez. He was not anxious to have trouble with the new-comer in Goodenough who had proved such a hard customer to tackle, so he slunk away, glad to get off so easily.

The veiled woman appeared to have been somewhat startled, for she trembled slightly as she turned toward the colonel and murmured her thanks somewhat brokenly.

"It was a very little thing, lady," declared the man, gracefully lifting his hat and bowing courteously. "I am happy to have been of so small a service. I saw the fellow was annoying you ere he dared grasp your wrist."

"He had been drinking," she said, speaking in what appeared to be an unnatural manner, probably caused by her recent alarm.

"Without doubt, and there are many more who have been doing the same thing. In fact, nearly all of the men on this floor have indulged more than is strictly necessary in order to keep their blood in good circulation. They are here for a good time, and drinking is part of it."

He heard a murmured reply, and decided the veiled female was little more than a girl, probably not over twenty at the most. She seemed out of place there all alone.

"If I can assist you in any way—" he began.

"I was looking for a friend," she interrupted with an uneasy laugh. "One cannot dance alone, you know."

He fancied she meant more than she said, and with perfect courtesy, he ventured:

"As your friend is not present, I will offer my company; but, if you do not wish to dance with me, do not hesitate to say so, for I shall not be offended. Do not favor me from any feeling of obligation."

The girl hesitated an instant, he saw her eyes scanning him through the heavy folds of the veil, then she said:

"You have the appearance of a gentleman and I will dance with you."

"Thank you," smiled he. "The music strikes into a waltz."

In another moment they were gliding away together, the handsomest couple and most graceful dancers on the floor.

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER THE WALTZ.

COLONEL COOL and his unknown partner were watched by many pairs of admiring eyes as they glided gracefully over the none too smooth floor of the dance hall. Never before had such dancing been witnessed beneath the canvas canopy of the Wanderer's Home.

"I'll tell you 'at," one rough fellow observed, "thet thar's w'at I calls slick waltzin', I do! None of yer pawin' roun' an' skullin', but jest ginowine slippin', slick 's grease. Thet Kunnel Cool kin dance ez well's he kin shoot ur use his dukes, an' thet's sayin' er blamed good bit."

It was not long before the admired couple were almost alone on the floor. The girl seemed to notice this with some uneasiness and the colonel heard her murmur something.

"Shall we stop?" he asked.

She nodded slightly.

There were mingled expressions of half-expressed applause, murmured admiration and muttered disappointment as the handsome man and the veiled girl wandered arm in arm toward a door that opened into a small, airy apartment where "refreshments" were served for the thirsty dancers.

"I thank you very much, lady," said Colonel Cool, speaking in a low tone. "I speak the truth when I say that waltz has given me great pleasure. It has been so long since I danced last that I have truly forgotten just how long it is."

At this moment the Man from Santa Fe felt the girl give a start, and noticing she turned quickly from a certain point, he glanced in the direction he fancied she had been looking. He saw nothing unusual. Like half the people in the dance hall, a tall, rather pale young man was gazing steadily at them. The colonel recognized him as the very individual who had come so near being hanged that day by the drunken cowboys and favored him with a slight bow.

But Ned Morgan did not appear to notice the cool man at all. His eyes were fastened on the veiled woman at the colonel's side, and his steady stare was one of amazement and inquiry. Apparently he was quite forgetful of his wounded shoulder and the slit made in his coat-sleeve by Apache Nan's knife.

Into the refreshment room passed Colonel Cool and the unknown girl. The place was well lighted, and eight or ten small round tables were provided for those who did not wish to dash off their drinks at the little bar. The prevailing drinks were whisky straight and beer, many of the girls who would not drink liquor taking the latter.

Selecting a table, the colonel and his partner sat down, the girl taking care to secure a position where she could watch the door opening into the dance hall.

"What will you drink?" asked the Man from Santa Fe. "I doubt if we can have champagne," with a smile, "but they doubtless have something besides liquor. Will you take beer?"

She shook her head.

"Just a glass of water, if you please," came in a low tone from beneath the veil.

"I doubt if they have it. I almost doubt if they ever heard of it," he laughed; "but we will discover."

He rapped sharply on the table, and in a moment the only waiter in the room approached.

"Have you water?"

"Have I *what*?" exclaimed the astonished fellow.

"Water, dear sir—God's only beverage."

"This room is run for money, partner, not for fun. If you want any of the regular drinks, please order them."

The colonel smiled, quite undisturbed.

"Bring us a glass of beer and a glass of water," he said, "and you shall receive the price of two beers. That is business, so be lively, for we are thirsty."

The waiter hesitated a moment, then turned away, muttering something in a low tone. In a few minutes the beer and water appeared.

"I thought that would bring it," smiled the cool man, with evident satisfaction, as he gently pushed the glass of water across the table to his partner. "Money is the key that unlocks all doors—even the door of a fair woman's heart. Now we will quench our thirst. Here's to hidden beauty everywhere, but chiefly to that concealed behind the veil of a certain charming little dancer. The world for a glimpse!"

The glasses touched and were lifted, but to Colonel Cool's surprise and disappointment, the girl lowered hers without tasting its contents, the veil still remaining unlifted.

"You do not drink!" he exclaimed.

"Not now," with a slight motion of the head.

"I am disappointed," he declared. "I am possessed by a burning desire to see that veil lifted."

She set the glass upon the table and leaned toward him a bit, as she appeared to scrutinize him narrowly through the folds of that baffling veil. He also lowered his glass, and his eyes were turned frankly upon her.

"I have seen you before," she asserted, and he fancied there was a slight tremor in her voice.

"It is possible. Indeed, the conviction has been growing on me that we have met."

"Yes, we have met!"

He saw the small white hand that rested on the table suddenly become clinched, as if its owner were moved by a powerful emotion. Through the folds of the veil her eyes were gleaming strangely.

"I think I have seen you once before to-day," he observed, quite carelessly.

"To-day?"

"Yes."

"You must be mistaken!"

"Oh, such a thing is barely possible; still I seldom make a mistake."

"Where did you think you saw me?"

"In the bar-room of this establishment."

"The bar-room—a place where ladies never go!"

"Unless they are disguised."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I have said—nothing more, nothing less."

Silence fell between them, and once more they regarded each other steadily, the colonel trying to make out the outlines of the face beneath that hateful veil. The unknown girl seemed to have forgotten to watch the door that opened into the dance-hall, from which once more came the rather monotonous music of the violins, the sing-song calls of the prompter, and the shuffle of many feet.

Finally, Colonel Cool declared:

"I will give five hundred dollars for a look at the face behind that veil."

The girl laughed, a low, scornful laugh.

"It is not enough."

"Then I will double the offer."

"A thousand?"

"Yes."

"Not enough."

"Two thousand."

"You are still low."

"Have you a price?"

"Yes."

"Name it."

"Your life!"

The man did not appear startled; it seemed nothing could amaze him. He simply gave a low, short whistle indicative of amusement more than anything else, then he laughingly observed:

"You are just a bit *high*."

Lifting the glass of beer, he sipped it slowly, still watching his singular companion. The girl appeared to be growing somewhat nervous and excited, for her bosom was heaving irregularly and the fingers of her hand which rested on the table were working restlessly.

After a few moments, the man lowered the glass and said:

"I am now still more sure I saw you once before to-day."

She did not speak.

"I am pretty good at penetrating disguises," he added, "and almost the instant my eyes rested on you I knew you were in disguise."

A mirthless laugh came from behind the veil.

"Your perception is very great, sir; yet you knew me not when we met in the dance hall."

"That is where you are mistaken; I knew you for the one I saw in the bar-room—knew you when that fellow stopped you and you began to talk with him."

"And yet knowing me so well and having seen me in the bar-room as you claim, you are anxious to look beneath this veil?"

"Yes; I would see you in your true character. In the bar-room you were disguised; here you are veiled."

"You have heard the price. I am armed. If you wish to look on my face so badly, you can snatch away the veil. I will promise you a fair look, then I will shoot you through the heart."

"No, thanks," smiled the Man from Santa Fe. "I really hate to decline your kind offer, but you see my life is all the life I happen to have and I do not wish to dispose of it just at present. I hope you will not feel at all put out by your failure to make a bargain!"

She made an impatient gesture.

"You are inclined to make light of it all," said the girl; "but I am in deadly earnest, for I know you, Herman Bardon!"

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER BLOW AT THE COOL MAN.

As she spoke these words in a low, intense tone, the veiled unknown leaned forward and fixed her gaze fairly on the colonel's eyes; but if she expected the man to start or betray emotion of any kind, she must have been disappointed, for his face remained as impassive as that of a marble image. A low cry of vexation broke from her lips.

"Are you made of ice?" she fairly hissed.

He shook his head, smiling.

"Not a bit of it, my dear young lady; there is good warm blood in my veins and genuine flesh on my bones."

"I almost doubt it."

He held out his hand.

"If a touch of that does not convince you I shall be surprised in truth."

She drew back with a visible shudder.

"I would not touch it again for the world," she declared, in a hoarse whisper. "I do not

see how I brought myself to dance with you, you villain."

"Now hold on," said the colonel, slowly. "I do not object to 'most anything from a member of the fair sex, but doesn't it strike you that you are going a bit too far?"

"What a cold blooded creature you are, Herman Bardon!"

"There is another thing I wish to speak of, if you please. Who is Herman Bardon?"

A low, bitter laugh came from her hidden lips.

"It is useless for you to try that game. You cannot deceive me; I know your hated, handsome face too well! You are Herman Bardon!"

"I have always made it a practice not to contradict a lady, but I must tell you that you are laboring under a mistake. I am not Herman Bardon, whoever he is."

"Liar!"

"Neither is that my name."

She smote the table with one small clinched hand.

"You must be a fool to think you can bluff me! I have tracked you down, and revenge shall be mine!"

"So it is revenge you are playing for, is it? I must say you are an admirable actress; but don't you think you had better let up on this little farce?"

She sunk back in the chair and glared at him through the veil. With a calm smile of mingled amusement and annoyance, he fastened his eyes steadily on the twin orbs which seemed to glow beneath the baffling covering. Noticing this, she started quickly, saying:

"It is useless for you to try to exert your mesmeric influence over me again, monster! The spell is forever broken. I am no longer a simple, romantic girl to be swayed at the will of a human serpent in disguise."

"I am glad to hear you say so," he declared, with an air of mock sincerity.

"I have steeled my nerves for anything," she continued, not heeding his sarcasm. "If I had not, I could not have danced with you to-night, hating you as I do. As it was, my very soul revolted against such a thing, but I fairly forced myself to play the part of a foolish girl who had wandered into this place for amusement."

"Well, this is really becoming interesting," murmured the Man from Santa Fe, as he disposed of the beer that had remained in his glass.

"Pray go on."

"Once while we were dancing," asserted the strange girl, speaking somewhat wildly, although it was plain she was doing her best to keep cool, "I came near driving a dagger into your heart!"

"Another narrow escape for yours truly."

"The dagger was hidden in the folds of my dress. The impulse to end your wicked career came so strongly upon me that my hand sought and found it. I grasped the handle. How I longed to flash out the deadly little weapon and plunge it into your bosom! In my mind I pictured how you would fall dying at my feet. I pictured the excitement of the spectators as I stood above you holding the dagger aloft—the deadly little dagger stained with your blood. I thought how I would bend over you and lift the veil so that your glazing eyes might have a last look at the face of the girl whose life you blasted and ruined. Ah!"

Carried away by the excitement of her own tragic fancies, she rested her elbows on the table and dropped her veiled face into her hands. There was a moment of silence, then the cool man bent forward and touched her arm lightly. She started back as if struck by a poisonous serpent.

"Don't you think you had better take a swallow of this?" calmly inquired Colonel Cool, as he pushed the glass of water toward her. "It may make you feel better."

And then, as she said not a word, he added:

"If you do not wish me to see your face, I will turn away while you are drinking."

There appeared to be nothing but the utmost respect and consideration about his manner just then, but instantly her anger blazed forth.

"You smooth-tongued wretch! Your time is coming! Do you think I have pursued you thousands of miles for nothing? A year ago just when all my life seemed fair before me and I fancied the future held naught but happiness, you thrust your hateful self between me and all I loved! I would rather at that moment I had seen a fiend from hades!"

"Where did all this occur?"

"Bah! Why do you persist in pretending ignorance? I can not be deceived by your lies now. You deceived me once in the long ago, but the years have made a change. When you had ensnared your prize—the pretty, foolish country girl—you were confronted by some evidence of a past crime, and like the villain you are, you fled in the night without even bidding adieu to the one who at that moment fancied you were more than life to her. But when you were gone the spell was broken and she saw the terrible mistake she had made. How bitterly she repented her folly!"

She paused a moment, but the man said not a word. He seemed waiting for her to continue.

"A year passed, then came evidences of your death. Now I know it was but another of your

tricks. I made certain—as I supposed—that you were dead without a doubt. The most careful investigation seemed to show such to be the fact. I was free! More than that, no one knew of my youthful folly save the brother whom you never saw and who had investigated the reports of your death. I resolved no other person should ever know, and then I fancied life looked bright before me once more.

"Time passed on and another happiness came into my life. Oh, what a fearful mistake I made in not telling him all! But I thought it useless; the dead past was forever buried, and I went to him heart and body pure. There was no stain upon me, although I had been guilty of girlish folly in the past. Oh, what happiness came to us both! We were all the world to each other! How full of golden sunshine the future looked!

"Then—then you appeared, like one from the dead. You know my horror when I saw you. You came to the house—our home. Oh, the horror of the moment when I saw you standing before me! I fainted at your feet, but when I came to you were still there. I swore then I would hunt you to your death, and I shall keep my oath."

"This is like a piece out of a sensational novel," observed Colonel Cool. "I can only think of one explanation to it all. I must be remarkably like this Herman Bardon who did you such a terrible wrong."

A low, passionate cry came from the lips of the strange girl, and like a flash she lifted a revolver and pointed it straight at his breast.

"Your time has come!" she hissed. "I am going to shoot you dead!"

He did not start or lose color in the least, but he quietly said:

"You had better cock your weapon before you fire."

A single glance had shown him the tiny weapon was not ready for use.

With nervous haste she drew back the hammer. He watched her as if quite unconcerned. If he had wished, he might have snatched the weapon from her hand before she could have used it, but he made no motion to do so. Once more she pointed the revolver at his breast, saying with forced calmness:

"In one minute you die!"

"Then in one minute your hands will be stained with the blood of a man who never did you a wrong. If it is my fate to die by the hand of a woman, I reckon it will be useless for me to try to avoid it. I shall not pass in my chips till my time comes."

His calmness seemed to shake her nerve. Had he betrayed any excitement or consternation she would surely have pulled the trigger. As it was she hesitated. Could it be possible she was mistaken, after all?

"Your hand is shaking," said the menaced man. "If you are not careful, you will make a fearful botch of the job, and I do object to being half-killed. Whole or none is my style."

At this moment the veiled girl saw a man who was standing in the doorway which led into the dance hall regarding her steadily in a strange manner, and with a low gasp, she let fall the hand which held the revolver.

Ned Morgan was a witness of the little scene. Seeing he was observed, the young Easterner stepped into the room, advancing straight toward the table at which the veiled girl and the colonel were sitting.

At this moment a man approached from the other side of the room—a man who had also been watching the cool man and the girl.

It was the gambler, black Rolf.

Suddenly when the dark-bearded rascal thought he had reached a favorable position, a knife flashed in his hand and he struck straight at the colonel's back.

But, Ned Morgan was there, and with his uninjured arm he warded off the blow which otherwise would surely have ended Colonel Cool's life.

"None of that, you murderous devil!" cried the young man, hotly.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN "EXCLUSIVE SET."

WITH a savage imprecation, the baffled gambler sprang toward the door, feeling it was best to make his escape at once now that his deadly design had been foiled.

At the door he paused to lift the gleaming knife aloft and cry:

"The hour of vengeance is coming, Randolph Myers!"

"Then he disappeared into the dance hall.

"Allow me to thank you for your prompt action, my friend," said the man from Santa Fe, arising. "But for you I must have been cut. You put me in your debt."

"On the contrary, I have simply squared accounts. You must remember I am the fellow whom you helped defend against the enraged cowboys to-day."

"I do, sir," smiled the colonel. "You were in a tight box then, and I reckon you would have stretched hemp but for the prompt action

of that wildly handsome young lady. She stepped between you and death and was really the instrument of your rescue. But for her, I should have been too late.

"You had better look out for that black-whiskered fellow. He means murder, that is plain. If I were in your place, I would follow him and give him the punishment he justly deserves."

"Good advice, but the man with the knife is quite out of the way by this time. We shall meet again, then I will talk it over with the boy. Until then—Hello!"

The exclamation was caused by Ned Morgan's sudden action. The young Easterner had seen the veiled girl gliding swiftly toward the dance hall and he quickly sprang after her. She glanced over her shoulder and saw his move. With a low cry, she hurried on.

Just as Ned reached the doorway he came in violent contact with a man who was entering, and both staggered back a step. The stranger uttered an oath. Ned muttered a short apology and hurried on. But the little accident had given the veiled girl time enough to reach the back door, and he saw her just disappearing into the darkness beyond.

"She shall not escape me thus!"

With the low exclamation, he dashed forward after the strange unknown. Out into the darkness he sprang, running forward a few steps before he realized the sudden change from light to darkness made him for the moment like a blind man. Then he felt a heavy blow on the head and fell to the ground, a thousand bright lights seeming to flash before his eyes.

"Darned if I don't believe I've slugged ther wrong galoot!"

Faintly he seemed to hear the words. He fancied the speaker was very far away. There were singular rumbling sounds in his head and he felt sharp pains which seemed to pierce his brain.

"You blundering fool!" hissed a second voice. "Strike a match quickly and see if you have made an error."

"He followed right arter ther gal, an' I thought of course he must be ther right one."

Then there was a moment's pause, after which a tiny blaze flared up before Ned's eyes and the light of a burning match was cast into his face, reflected by the hands of the man who held it. Two exclamations of anger and disappointment followed.

"Wrong cuss!"

"Yes; this is not Colonel Cool."

"Bad job; better skip."

"You are right. It will be useless to remain here longer."

The match was cast aside.

"Shell we make ernother try at ther cool critter ter-night?"

"Yes, we are not done with him. Come on."

Two dark figures stole swiftly away in the gloom and Ned Morgan was left alone. In a short time he was able to sit up, and although his head was throbbing as if it would burst, he managed to get upon his feet and stagger aimlessly into the darkness.

Meantime what about Colonel Cool, whose enemies seemed to be springing up thickly on all sides? Despite the fact that deadly foes seemed multiplying around him, the Man from Santa Fe appeared in no way excited or alarmed. He remained the same calm, smiling, unruffled enigma.

When Ned Morgan had vanished in pursuit of the veiled girl, the colonel once more sat down and rapped sharply on the table. When the waiter appeared, he ordered another glass of beer.

The beverage was brought and the man disposed of it in his placid, leisurely way, seeming in no haste and apparently having nothing in the wide world to worry or disturb him. Whatever his thoughts were, or if he was thinking at all, his face made no betrayal.

The beer being finished, he arose and strolled into the dance-hall again. As he stood watching the scene of boisterous merriment, Big Fist Mose approached, wiping the perspiration from his face with a huge bandanna handkerchief.

"What, ho!" cried the big fellow, striking an attitude and waving the handkerchief above his head. "What do me eyes behold? Can it be? Ah, yes, 'tis the noble one, the mighty hero, the noblest galoot on two legs! All hail! Colonel, I greet thee!"

The cool man did not refuse the outstretched hand.

"Now me heart doth grow warm indeed!" continued Mose, his good-natured face beaming with pure delight. "It doth one good to grasp the hand of such a noble knight! It does, by chowder!"

"My friend," smiled the colonel, "you have been imbibing a bit too freely."

"Dost say so?" and the giant's countenance assumed a sad expression. "Then I fear it must be true, for you are the second one who has told me that. I reckon I'd best swear off for good."

"It might be a good plan."

"But half the comfort of my life would be swept away at one fell stroke of the pen if I signed the pledge. Woe is me!"

"That's all imagination."

"Then how sweet are the delusions of one's imagination! But, I say, colonel, I have been shaking the hoof. Great sport, by Jove! Lots of pretty girls. Come on and spank it down awhile, dear sir."

"I have danced once to-night, and I don't know as I really care for any more. What's the next?"

"Plain quadrille. There, there goes the call! Come on, colonel, let's form an exclusive set."

At that moment Cool espied a rather pretty dark-eyed Spanish girl, and, following the custom of the place, introduced himself and begged for the pleasure of her company for the next dance. The Man from Santa Fe spoke Spanish fluently, a thing which plainly pleased the girl, and in her charming way she consented to dance with him.

Big Fist was delighted.

"Now for that exclusive set," he whispered, and hastened away to get a partner.

Good fortune seemed to favor the big fellow, for he easily secured a partner, and Colonel Cool was surprised to note that Mose's companion was a very good-looking girl.

It was not a very easy thing to make up an "exclusive" set in such a mixed assembly, but they finally succeeded in forming one that pleased them, the third gentleman being none other than Old Socorro Jim, who had followed Mose into the dance hall, and by chance had begun to bandy words with a sharp-tongued little Irish girl. The girl was amused by the old man's rather witty retorts, and when Big Fist dragged them both on the floor, she seemed delighted with the "fun," and did not run away.

"Come along, Jimmy boy," chuckled the giant. "We are going to form an exclusive set over here with Colonel Cool in it. It will be the honor of our lives to dance with him."

"But I hain't tapped her down fer so long, I've clean fergot how," protested the alarmed old fellow. "I shell meck an awful mess! Let me go, you derned big idjit!"

"Oh, come along wid yeess!" laughed the girl. "Yees can't decave the loikes av us wid thit koin'd av tork. Ye're a gay old masher, thit's whut ye be now!"

"Oh, Lord o' Israeel!" gasped Old Jim. "W'at a tarnal all-fired scrape I'm in!"

It happened that Uncle Jerry, the proprietor of the Wanderer's Home, was in the room. In some way he discovered what was going on, and with a masked lady for a partner, he asked for admission into the "exclusive set." He was given a place opposite Colonel Cool, and the set was full.

The music soon struck up and the prompter began to call. What a dance that was! As soon as Old Jim got fairly started he seemed to suddenly throw off the weight of twenty years and become as spry and frisky as a boy. And it proved that he was anything but a poor dancer, although his style was far from modern. Once more his thin, sharp face fairly beamed with the ardor of youth and he "tapped it down" with a vigor that was quite amazing. The little Irish girl was bubbling over with merriment, and Big Fist Mose afterward declared it was better than a circus to see the odd couple "balance and swing."

As for Mose himself, he proved to be a very good dancer despite his size. His dancing was characterized by a great deal of "vigor," and it was rather amusing to make a comparison between him and the little scout, who was hopping about like a lively flea.

Colonel Cool and Uncle Jerry were both fine dancers, and their partners were not deficient. Their greatest amusement lay in watching the other side of the set.

"Never expected ter cut this caper erg'in in my life," asserted Socorro Jim, vigorously wiping the perspiration from his face. "Darned ef my ole heels don't feel ez coltish ez w'en I wuz a fool boy!"

"Arrah now, it's an illigant dancer yees be!" laughed his partner. "It's nothing loike thit stoile av yooers hiv Oi sane since Oi lift the Auld Country."

"It'd hev ter be er blamed poor tool thet c'u'dn't dance with them thar bright eyes o' yourn watchin' him," Jim declared, bound not to be outdone in the way of compliments. "Ef I wuz twenty years younger now them eyes w'u'd jest knock me silly wild."

"Och, it's an auld fraud yees be!" and she pinched his arm mercilessly. "A shugar-coated toongue ye hiv in yer mooth."

Merrier and merrier grew the dance. Big Fist perspired copiously and used his big bandanna with great vigor. Old Jim paid no heed though the water stood in beads on his face. The music seemed to set every nerve tingling with new life.

But the end came at length and the "exclusive set" broke up.

A short time later Colonel Cool left the dance hall for the gambling department. A crowd around the faro lay-out attracted his attention, and with an almost imperceptible start, he noticed that the Lucky Pards were "bucking the tiger."

CHAPTER XVII.

COLONEL COOL REFUSES TO FIGHT.

The colonel at once approached the faro-table.

"Sech thunderin' luck I never see!" muttered one of the spectators.

"Ef Dandy keeps it up he'll break ther bank shore," asserted another.

"He could have broken the bank before this many a time if he had wanted to," observed a third.

"He acts like he means it this time."

"And he hain't been playin' but a few minutes either."

"Ther luck of them two velvet kids doth beat thunder!"

Colonel Cool's ears were wide open, and he heard every word, although he made no sign. He secured a favorable position where he could watch Dandy Duce as he played.

"Make your game, gentlemen," called the dealer, in his usual mechanical manner.

Besides Dandy Duce there were but two persons playing, and they were going it light. Dandy, however, was betting heavily and in an apparently reckless manner.

The deal began and once more the little sport's luck stood by him. Silent Sid, stern and unmoved, stood behind his partner's chair.

Colonel Cool slipped quietly into a vacant seat and purchased five hundred dollars' worth of chips. During the next deal the Man from Santa Fe bet against the corduroy sport every time and won two-thirds of his ventures. Murmurs of surprise came from the spectators, but Dandy pretended he did not notice the cool man at all.

Once more the cards were drawn from the box and once more Colonel Cool bet exactly opposite from Dandy Duce. If the little sport backed a card to win, the colonel risked an equal amount that it would lose, and *vice versa*. Again the Santa Fe Sport was a winner and again Dandy lost.

There is nothing more exasperating at faro than for one player to repeatedly and openly back certain cards directly against another player's bets and for a similar amount, yet Dandy seemed to keep control of his temper in a remarkable manner, for he still betrayed no sign that he had noticed Colonel Cool.

"Hello, hello, hello!" exclaimed one of the spectators, in three distinct tones of voice. "What do me eyes behold! Hither wend your way, dear Jimmy of the nimble foot! The gentleman from Santa Fe doth at the table sit, and by my troth, I will bet a mule he breaks the bank!"

Big Fist Mose was there, and Socorro Jim pressed close at his heels.

With the next deal the colonel continued to bet against the corduroy sport, and, with remarkable luck, he won every stake.

"Whoop!" shouted the excited giant. "Didn't I so remark! As the late William Shakespeare oftentimes observed, 'That takes the biscuit!'"

"Dandy's luck is busted," declared one who had been watching the play since the little sport sat down at the table.

"It's hoodooed," asserted another.

"That is it," agreed the little dandy, calmly rising to his feet—"my luck is hoodooed, and there is the individual who has worked the spell!"

He pointed a white finger straight at Colonel Cool.

"Thet's jest right," growled some one on the outskirts of the little gathering.

"What are you driving at, my little friend?" smiled the cool man, looking Dandy fair in the face.

"I am driving at *you*," was the reply. "You have insulted me by your play."

"In what way?"

"You know well enough in what way. Your betting has been an open insult to my judgment."

"Now aren't you drawing that a bit strong?" with a smile that was very sweet.

"You know I am not. Since you entered the game you have bet every card against me."

"And by so doing I am quite a snug little sum ahead. Had I bet on the same cards as you and in the same manner, I should be away behind at the present moment. I believe a man has a right in this game to stake his money as he chooses."

"That's correct," put in Big Fist Mose.

A slight flush crept into Dandy's face.

"Yes," he acknowledged, "a man has a right to bet the cards as he chooses, but I insist that your play was an insult to me."

"You are too sensitive, my young friend," said Colonel Cool, in a manner that was just a bit patronizing. "However, if your nerves lay so near the surface, I will withdraw from the game."

He pushed out his chips and received cash for them, then he arose, saying with a smile:

"There, little one, the entire table is yours now, for all of me. Go in, and I wish you luck."

But he found himself confronted by Silent Sid.

"Hold on," said the quiet pard, "we are not done with you yet."

The colonel elevated his eyebrows.

"Indeed!"

"You have insulted my pard," added Sid, "and we demand satisfaction. I represent the fighting side of the combination."

"Oh, holy chowder!" groaned Big Fist Mose.

Colonel Cool lifted his hand and stroked his mustache, as if to partially conceal the smile upon his lips.

"You do not look like a prize-fighter," he observed.

The silent man made an impatient gesture.

"I do my fighting like a gentleman. Will you meet me?"

"Really I hate to disappoint you, but in this instance I *must* decline."

"You will not fight?"

"Not with you."

Quick as a flash of light, Silent Sid's hand shot out, striking the cool man's face with a spat that was plainly heard by every one in the vicinity.

"Now," cried the angry fellow, "you cannot refuse to meet me."

Colonel Cool calmly produced a snowy-white handkerchief and passed it gently over the spot where the quiet pard's open hand had touched his cheek, the same pleasant smile curling his lips, till the milk-white teeth gleamed out a bit. There was not the least exhibition of surprise or anger.

"You are mistaken," he said, with his usual placidness, "I still refuse to fight you."

Low cries of amazement came from the spectators, and Big Fist Mose uttered a groan of astonishment.

"Do my ears deceive me?" gasped the big fellow, his countenance a picture of wonder.

"Waal, I *will* be derved!" muttered Socorro Jim.

Silent Sid seemed no less amazed than the crowd.

"Do you mean to say you take water?" he demanded.

"I mean to say I will not fight with *you*!"

"Your reasons—"

"I prefer not to state."

"I demand to know them."

The colonel smiled, but did not speak.

"Derved ef he *don't* take water!" cried one fellow at the further side of the crowd.

The man from Santa Fe turned in the direction of the unseen speaker.

"If you will come forward, my friend," he said, quietly, "I will take the contract to make you swallow those words in less than one minute."

"Hoop!" shouted Big Fist, driving one huge clinched hand into the palm of the other. "That is business, straight! Do come out, stranger, and let us have a little fun—*do*!"

But the unknown did not advance.

"If you do not meet me like a man," said Silent Sid, "I shall brand you a coward."

"A brand you cannot make stick," was the retort.

"Again I demand to know your reasons for not meeting me like a man. Speak out!"

"Well, if you insist, I never fight boys or women."

A moment of silence followed the words, then the quiet pard angrily exclaimed:

"Which is no reason at all! It is plain you are afraid of me."

"You are at liberty to think so."

"And I do. You are a miserable coward, Colonel Cool, as you call yourself!"

Big Fist Mose fairly danced up and down with excitement, but the Man from Santa Fe betrayed no unusual emotion.

"In time you may change your mind," and he bowed gracefully. "For the present, I bid you good-night."

With these words, he turned and walked calmly away, leaving behind him two angry pards and a mystified crowd.

"W'at in blazes duz it mean?" asked Old Jim.

"You have got me, as the worm remarked to the early bird," was the giant's reply. "I reckon there must be something back of this yere affair. I can't think of anything else that will explain it in the least."

The Lucky Pards exchanged a few low words, then Dandy cashed the chips remaining in his possession and they left the table together.

A short time later Big Fist Mose joined Colonel Cool, who was quietly smoking a fragrant cigar, and together they left the Wanderer's Home.

In a dark nook across the street from the saloon two men were crouching, both of whom uttered exclamations of disappointment when they saw the colonel in company with the giant.

"Thet knocks ther stuffin' out o' ther hull game!" one of the watchers growled, speaking guardedly.

"Yes," replied the other, "this is the second time we have been foiled to-night, but my hour is coming. That murderous devil seems protected by the Evil One himself, but Junot Delorme will never rest while the blood of two brothers cries to be avenged. I will yet have his life! Other days are coming."

Then both men stole away and were lost in the night.

Socorro Jim had remained in the saloon, but thirty minutes after the departure of Cool and Big Fist the latter returned and at once sought the old man out.

"Jimmy boy," said Mose, "that little girl of yours wants you. She has found the young fellow who came so near being hanged by the cowboys, and he appears to be injured in some way. He acts like a crazy man, and she is getting him to your residence."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A HOPELESS PASSION.

SOCORRO JIM at once arose and left the Wanderer's Home, turning his steps toward his cabin up the slope as soon as he had bidden Big Fist good-night outside the door.

"So Nan's foun' ther boyee, has she," he muttered, to himself, as he strode along through the darkness. "Wonder how she happened ter find him. Pr'aps she follered us inter camp. It 'ud be jest like her. Never kin tell w'at she'll do, an' it never works ter try ter boss her any."

"Feller's hurt, Moses said. Wonder w'at kind o' er snag he's bin buttin' ag'in'. He hain't jest used ter this yere kentry, an' so he's mighty ap' ter git damaged whar he hedn't ary need ter. Acts like er crazy man, does he? Waal, I reckon thar's suthin' ther matter with old-fashioned Hanner."

The old man hastened forward, hoping to overtake Nan and the young tenderfoot, but they must have traveled swiftly. When he came in sight of his cabin, he saw a light shining from the open doorway.

"Hooh!" he grunted. "Don't reckon ther tenderfut's very nigh killed. Ef he wuz, he'd never bin able ter travel at sech er jog, an' he must 'a' traveled, fer ther leetle gal c'dn't 'a' kerried him."

A few moments later Jim entered the cabin and found Ned Morgan lying on the lounge while Nan was bathing his head with cool water.

"Waal, waal!" exclaimed the scout. "So you struck er bit o' trouble, did ye, young feller?"

"Who's that?" cried Ned, starting up and gazing wildly toward the old man.

"It's only jest me," Jim replied, catching a warning glance from Nan.

"Yes," said the girl, "it's only ole Daddy Jim. Lay down ag'in an' let me putt this yere cloth roun' her head. Daddy's all right; you remember him."

Ned sunk back with a breath of relief.

"Yes, I think I remember," he answered, slowly. "Someway my head is all out of fix. What's the matter with me anyhow?"

"Oh, northin' much," she responded, with apparent carelessness. "You have been hurt a little, but you will come roun' all right, I reckon. Jest you keep cool."

"You're a queer girl—a good girl; yes, a good girl. I had a sister once. She is dead, but she was a good girl. Oh, my head! I believe I was struck."

Old Jim advanced cautiously into the cabin, and Nan carefully bandaged the unfortunate young man's head. Jim stood watching them both for several minutes, then he got down his pipe and filled it, making no offer to speak again.

Ned lay quite still, sometimes watching Nan with a half puzzled expression and sometimes closing his eyes and seeming to be thinking—or trying to think.

"Yes," he finally muttered, "I am sure I was struck, but I don't know who struck me. I remember hearing some one saying it was the wrong man and then I was left alone. But what happened before that? I do not seem to remember."

Jim lighted his pipe and moved his chair so he could get a good view of the young man's face, then he sat calmly smoking and watching the unfortunate tenderfoot. Now and then he would glance at Nan, whose face wore an anxious expression as she bent over the injured young Easterner, and once or twice the scout shook his head a bit in a regretful manner.

After a time, Ned Morgan seemed to fall asleep, and Nan softly arose to her feet. She gave Jim a warning gesture and noiselessly approached him.

"He's asleep now, Daddy," she whispered.

Jim nodded shortly.

"We mustn't rout him up any, Daddy. I reckon p'raps he'll kem roun' all right arter he has a snooze."

"Mebbe."

"But he's pretty bad off now, an' it'll be best fer some 'un ter keep watch o' him."

"I reckon. You roll in; I'll look arter him."

But Nan shook her head firmly.

"Nary roll, Daddy. You're ther one to turn in, while I look arter him."

"Now look yere, Nan, I'm—"

"No ye hain't," said Nan, positively. "You know 'tain't no use fer you ter talk w'en I settle on er thing, so you may jest as well git yer snooze."

"Yer ther dervedest set critter I 'most never see, thet's w'at ye be!" grunted the old man, wrinkling his face more than ever in a desperate attempt to scowl at her.

"Waal, I kin take keer o' this young feller better'n w'at you kin, so thet settles it."

The old man was silenced, although he shook his head still more soberly as she turned away. It was plain he was not pleased with something.

The girl returned to the side of the young man, and Jim continued his smoke in silence, keeping his eyes fastened on her all the time. At length he arose, saying in a low tone:

"Ye'd best call me bum-by an' let me tek yer place."

She made no reply, and ten minutes later Old Jim was fast asleep.

For some time Ned Morgan slept peacefully, but he finally awoke with a slight start and fixed his eyes on the watching girl's face.

"Oh!" he said. "You are here, are you? I am glad." Then he closed his eyes and fell asleep again.

The girl's face was worthy of study as she watched the sleeping man, for a mingling of many emotions was depicted thereon.

Finally, Ned began to mutter in his sleep. At first his words were low and indistinct, but after a time she could understand many of them.

"Lost—lost!" he kept repeating from time to time. "Where—where can she be? Lost—lost! But I—will—find her. We were—happy. I must find—her. I will search—all—all world. Lost!"

Nan pressed her hands upon her bosom as if to still the wild beating of her heart and bent nearer, eager to catch every word. Her features were working strangely and her eyes gleamed like sparks of living fire.

For a time the sleeper remained silent, then he softly but plainly said:

"She was all the world—to me. Why—why did she—go—away? Never—never shall I see her—again. That was written on paper. I must—find her. All the world—will be—black without her—love."

The hands of the listening girl became clinched fists and she gripped them as if she were crushing the life out of something. A look of agony that was pitiful to see swept across her face.

Once more the lips of the sleeper moved, and again Apache Nan lowered her ear to listen.

"Mina—my darling!"

Softly, tenderly the unconscious man whispered the words.

Then the girl sprung to her feet with a wild gesture of despair and rushed from the cabin out into the darkness. All alone beneath the million stars that twinkled in the blue vault above she threw back her head and lifted her arms to heaven.

"My God!" she groaned. "I wish I wuz dead!"

What a hopeless, heart-breaking sound there was in those words! They seemed wrung from her white lips by a great agony; they seemed to come from the bottomless depths of a passion-swept soul.

A moment she stood in that attitude of wild despair, then she dropped her face into her hands and remained standing there perfectly motionless, not even seeming to breathe.

Not a breeze seemed stirring. A faint murmur came from the sleepless town below, but she heard it not. In those moments of intense mental anguish she was lost to everything around her. Even the sound of a pistol-shot that came floating up from the lawless camp did not arouse her.

After a time a choking groan came from the girl's lips, then she lifted her drawn face and smote her clinched hands together.

"Fool! fool! fool!" she cried, her voice sounding hoarse and unwomanly. "I'd orter known it! I did know it! Fool! fool! fool!"

Then she tried to calm herself, but she was only partially successful.

"I wuz a fool ter ever dream he c'd car' fer me! W'at am I onyhow—an igner'nt, miser'ble nuthin', that's w'at! An' him—why, he's a gentleman—an eddicated man! W'u'dn't I meck a fine wife fer sech as him!"

She broke into a bitter laugh—a laugh in which there was anything but merriment.

"W'u'dn't he be proud o' me—w'u'dn't he! W'u'dn't I be an ornymment ter s'ciety—oh, yes! An' w'u'dn't I feel fine in comp'ny with decent folks! Bah!"

"W'at did he ever come here fer? I wish ter God I'd never seen his face! I never car'd fer a man before I saw him, but I hed ter meck er fool o' merself then."

She began pacing nervously back and forth, now and then striking her hands together fiercely.

"I c'd kill merself!" she hissed. "By heavens! I reckon thet'd be the best way ter end it all! I've got ther verry tool ter do it with. I c'd jest putt ther muzzle ter my head an' pull ther trigger. Thet w'd do ther job. Ha! ha!"

"But she's ther one I'd like ter kill! If I c'd only git my han's on her throat I'd never tek 'em off till she wuz layin' dead at my feet! How I hate her! He called her Mina—his darling! I w'd give my life ter hear him call me thet!"

She scarcely knew what she said, and surely she was not accountable for her wild words. In a few short hours the first great passion of her life had crept unbidden into the heart of the

strange untutored waif and had taken possession of her very life, as it were.

"But she's not ter blame," Nan finally murmured. "I hain't got no right to blame her. She loved him—did she? He muttered about her bein' lost an' his never seein' her ag'in. P'raps she run away frum him an' so he's hurtin' fer her. If thet's so, she must be an awful fool, an' I hope he'll never find her—never, never, never! Then p'raps—No, no, no! I can't never be nuthin' ter him! I do wish I wuz dead!"

Then she flung herself face downward on the ground and burst into passionate weeping. For a time her whole frame was shaken by the intensity of her emotion, then her sobbing gradually grew less and less till it stopped entirely, but still she lay there face downward, one brown hand clutched full of earth and pebbles while the other grasped a tuft of grass.

The moon crept up from behind a distant peak and let its soft white light fall gently over the prostrate figure—a faint breeze sprung up and whispered mysteriously amid the pinion trees beside the cabin—a night bird uttered a despairing shriek as it swept down the hillside into the darkness of the valley below. Still that silent figure lay there on the ground like one bereft of life.

CHAPTER XIX.

JIM FREES HIS MIND.

OLD JIM slept soundly till morning, but he awoke with the first ray of daylight. He found Nan still sitting beside the couch on which Ned Morris was sleeping. She made a motion for him to remain silent so that the young man would not be disturbed, and in response he shook his head as if angry and beckoned her to follow him.

Jim led the way out of the cabin. He had made up his mind to say something to Nan and he felt as if he had better say it at once. The girl followed him, and in a short time they stood face to face in the open air. Then, for the first time, he noticed her eyes were red and swollen as if she had been weeping.

"Great jinks!" was the old man's mental exclamation. "I didn't reckon it'd gone so fur. Blame it tall!"

Of a sudden he seemed quite confused and hesitated about speaking, even about looking Nan in the face. She saw this, and said:

"You wanted ter say suthin', Daddy?"

"Yep."

"W'at wuz ye goin' ter say?"

Old Jim produced a plug of tobacco and bit off a liberal amount, then, as he restored the remaining piece to his pocket, he rased his weight on one foot, opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it again, grew very red even through his wrinkled, sun-tanned skin and coughed as if something was choking him.

Nan was amazed.

"W'at is it, Daddy?" she questioned again.

"Waal, ye see—thet is—I thought—"

Right there he broke off in a helpless manner and looked around as if contemplating a retreat to the house.

"Go on," said Nan.

"Drat it tall!" snapped the old man. "Can't ye guv a feller time? Can't say all I want ter with one word, an' I don't more'n git begun afore you interrupt me. Ef you don't want ter hear w'at I want ter say, why thet's ther eend on't."

"But I do want to hear it," asserted the girl, gazing at him in increasing wonder, for she had never known him to appear so strangely before.

"It's fer your good," he faltered, throwing his weight on the other foot and shrugging his rounded shoulders. "Ef 'twuzn't I w'dn't say it."

She waited quietly for him to continue.

"Ye know I set my life by ye, little one," Jim continued, desperately, "an' I w'dn't like ter see ye meck a blamed fool o' yerself all fer northin'—you know it, don't ye?"

"Course I do, Daddy."

"An' ye mustn't think hard o' ther ole man fer w'at he's goin' ter say. Ye won't, will ye?"

"Nuthin' kin meck me think hard o' you, Daddy."

"Now I feel more like drivin' ahead. It's o' ther young feller in thar I wants ter speak."

Nan started and changed color, her eyes dropping before his gaze and a red flush tinged her brown skin. He saw it all and his old heart felt a twinge of pain in her behalf.

"Now," added the scout, speaking with difficulty and finding it hard to express himself as he wished, "ther young tenderfut is er right peert sort o' er chap, but he's 'way up 'bove us common folks. He's got an eddycashun an' all thet, an' most likely he b'long's ter some fambly as thinks thei'selves o' ther fu'st goods. You kin see thet, can't ye, little one?"

Nan nodded, still keeping her eyes on the ground.

"Waal, now thish yere feller he don't putt on no airs, but to be course he knows he's er mighty sight higher grade now w'at we are, an' thet is w'at mecks me think a heap sight more o' him then I w'd t'otherwise. I s'pose it duz you, too."

"W'at are ye drivin' at, Daddy? You might jest ez well spit it right out fu'st as last, fer I kin see ye're beatin' roun' ther bush."

"All right, ef ye will hev it thet way, hyer goes: I reckon you're considerable tooken with thet thar tenderfut, Nan?"

"W'at mecks ye think so?" she asked, but her voice trembled a bit in spite of her effort to control it.

"I hain't blind!" spluttered Jim. "It's plain ez kin be ter me thet ye keer fer him more'n ye orter. I hoped I w'dn't hev ter speak o' it, fer I knew it w'dn't be pleasant, but I've made up my mind thet I'd better be hones' with ye, little one."

She did not speak and he continued:

"Not knowin' 'bout sech things, ye might think he'd car' fer ye, an' so ye might git ter thiukin' more o' him then ye orter. Thet's why I made up my mine. Not thet you hain't good enough fer ther best man as ever wore breeches, Nan, fer I know ye be, but you must think o' ther difference in your positions an' ef he'd be apt ter keer fer you ez you'd keer fer him. He c'dn't look inter yer heart and see jest w'at ye are, but he c'd see thet ye're uneddicated even ef ye are han'sum. Thet w'd be ernough. But thet hain't all."

Once more he paused, but she did not offer to speak. She stood with her hands clasped together in a fierce grip and her eyes fastened on the ground. She controlled her face so it showed no emotion save perhaps stony despair partially revealed.

"Ther w'ust o' it is," continued Socorro Jim, "thet ther young feller's dead smashed on another gal."

At this Nan gave a slight start, but did not look up.

"More'n thet," the old man added, relentlessly, "t'other gal's here in Goodenough."

The girl threw up her hands, crying:

"Here?"

Jim nodded.

"I've seen her. We kem on her last night ez we wuz goin' down inter ther town." And he told of the adventure already known to the reader.

The girl's eyes blazed with sudden fire.

"Now," said Jim, "you must see ther folly o' gittin' tooken with ther young feller, fer while you're thinkin' o' him, his mine is probly on t'other gal as he is dead in love with. She's most likely eddicated an' all thet, an' it's plain he thinks all ther worl' o' her, so—"

But at this point Nan cried:

"Don't, Daddy! I can't hear no more!"

Then she turned and ran swiftly away.

"Dunno but I wuz too mighty plain," muttered the old fellow, as he turned toward the cabin; "but it's er blamed sight better fer her ter know ther rock bottom truth then fer her ter git ary bit deeper in this yere business. She feels bad ernough ez it is, an' I must feel mighty nigh ez mean ez she does."

Entering the cabin, he found Ned wide awake and apparently as bright as ever.

"I think my sleep has fixed me all right," smiled the young Easterner. "I dreamed bad things a part of the night, but I must have got a liberal amount of good sleep."

Jim lighted his pipe and sat down at Ned's side to talk, but the young man had no idea of lying still.

"I am as well as ever—see," and he arose to his feet. "Of course my shoulder feels a bit stiff and my head is several sizes too large, but I don't mind those little things. I have business in Goodenough and I must attend to it."

"But ye're goin' ter stop right hyer tell arter grub," asserted the old man. "Thet's settled. Nan's jest stepped out. I reckon she'll be back right soon, an' then she'll git us some chuck."

Ned asked for some water and a place to wash and was directed by the old man. After he had used the water he came back to the couch and sat down. Jim questioned him about getting hurt, but much to Ned's relief, he said nothing about the veiled woman.

While Ned was briefly explaining how it came about that he received the blow on the head, Nan came in. She scarcely looked at him when he spoke to her, and her reply seemed strangely low. His eyes followed her wonderingly.

Old Jim saw all this, and he did his best to draw Ned's attention from the girl. In this he partially succeeded, and they continued talking till Nan announced that breakfast was ready.

At the table the girl waited on them both. She had learned to wait on Old Jim with careful consideration. He watched her as she poured out the coffee, and, although her face was quite pale, he saw she did not appear agitated in the least.

"You look pale this morning, Nan," said Ned.

"She's tired, I reckon," the old man hastened to say. "She kept watch o' ye a part o' ther night." For certain reasons he did not think it best to tell that the girl had sat beside the couch during the entire night.

"Was I as bad off as that?" asked Ned, in surprise. "I did not suppose I was."

"You wuz a leetle out o' yer head, that's all. Thet thar thump set yer wits ter wanderin'."

The girl said something about not feeling well,

and she did not partake of a bit of food. Both of the men noticed that, but only one of them knew the true cause of her abstinence.

When Ned was ready to leave the cabin after breakfast he looked for Nan in vain. She had stolen out and disappeared.

"Reckon she's gone for a walk or gallop," explained the old man. "She often does so in the 'arly mornin'. I'd go down ter town with ye, but I hev er leetle suthin' ter 'tend ter 'fore I leave."

Ned did not care for the scout's company for certain reasons, so he was well satisfied. He thought it strange the girl should disappear at such a time, but he did not dream she had stolen away to avoid bidding him good-by.

Down in the valley before he reached the outskirts of the town the young tenderfoot unexpectedly came upon two persons who were conversing together. One was a veiled woman whom he instantly recognized although he could not see her face. Twice had she eluded him the night before, for it was "Mina."

The man was Colonel Cool!

CHAPTER XX.

A MAN OF NERVE.

FOR an instant Ned halted with a low exclamation of surprise, then he darted swiftly forward and confronted the man and woman. The veiled lady gave a cry of surprise, but Colonel Cool did not appear startled in the least.

"What does this mean?" cried Ned, as he glanced from one to the other.

"The very question I was about to ask," smiled the Man from Santa Fe.

Ned Morgan clinched his hands and glared at the calm, sleek, handsome individual before him, and a feeling of the most intense hatred for the cool man found birth in his bosom. He felt a great desire to plant his fist fairly between those eyes which were turned upon his own in a manner half-puzzled, half-amused. A bitter oath struggled to his very lips and was only crushed back with the greatest difficulty.

"Answer me," he said, speaking as calmly as he could. "What does this mean?"

"Please make your question a bit plainer, young man. What does *what* mean?"

"Your meeting with this woman, sir!"

The colonel brushed a speck of dirt from his coat-sleeve.

"What right have you to ask such a question?" he calmly asked.

"Right—the best right of any one in all the world."

"So? What is the lady to you?"

"She is my wife!"

The cool man lifted his eyebrows a bit. "I wonder if the lady will acknowledge the connection," he said, turning toward the spot where the woman had been a moment before, it seemed. "Hello! she's departed!"

Unobserved, the veiled lady had slipped away in the excitement of the meeting.

"She must have been in a great hurry," half-laughed the Sport from Santa Fe.

For a moment Ned Morgan seemed a trifle dazed, then he turned on Colonel Cool with fresh fury.

"You smiling devil!" he fairly hissed. "I have the heart to kill you on the spot!"

"Oh, come now! it can't be you're crazy."

"Why did you meet that woman here—how happened it?"

"Quite by accident, I assure you."

"Do you speak the truth?"

"The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

"But this is not the first time you have met."

"Quite true."

"Last night I saw you with her."

"I believe you did."

"It is my turn to ask you, What is she to you?"

"A question I am not ready to answer at present."

Then silence fell between them. Ned glared at the cool, baffling man before him as if he longed to leap at his throat. Calmly Colonel Cool drew forth his cigar-case, critically selected a cigar, neatly clipped off the end with his pearly teeth, and then deliberately proceeded to light it.

Every careless, graceful move of the man seemed to add new fuel to the fire of fury that burned in Ned Morgan's heart. His blood coursed hotly in his veins. "Kill him! kill him!" an unseen spirit seemed whispering in his ears.

"You shall speak!" he cried, taking a step forward—"you shall tell me the truth, or I will tear it from your cursed smiling lips!"

The colonel removed the cigar from his lips and looked at the burning end in a critical manner to see if it was properly lighted.

"Hold on a moment," he requested, without even glancing at the other. "You are getting a trifle hot."

There was something in the quiet words that held young Morgan back, even while he longed to spring upon the man.

"You say this veiled lady is your wife?" spoke Cool.

"She is."

"Now isn't it possible she has deceived you somewhat?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think my words are plain. You know women are dreadfully deceiving, and it may be—"

"Stop! Do not dare utter a word against her!"

"You still have perfect confidence in her?"

Ned hesitated. A thousand times he had been tortured by doubts, but he would not let this smooth, smiling man know it for the world.

"Your insinuating questions are insulting!" he cried.

"But you do not answer them."

"No! I scorn them!"

"Well, that is your privilege; but I can think what I please."

A sudden thought flashed through Ned Morgan's brain. The first time his eyes rested on Colonel Cool's face, he had fancied they saw something familiar; now, of a sudden he remembered where and when he had looked upon the man before entering Goodenough.

"Ha! I know—I see it all!" he hoarsely gasped.

Colonel Cool blew out a perfect ring of white smoke and idly watched it as it dissolved in the air. With two strides, Ned Morgan grasped the smoker's arm.

"Yes," he cried, glaring into the colonel's face, "I am right! I knew I had seen that face before."

"Go a little light, please; your fingers are quite stout and my coat-sleeve is not made of iron."

"You passed me on that day—the very day she disappeared. You were going toward the house."

"What are you driving at now?"

"I believe you are the wretch who wrecked my home and happiness!"

"That is a serious charge."

"It is the truth; you are the man! I saw you near my home the day my wife left the place. A strange man was seen to enter the house. You are the man!"

The colonel flicked a bit of white ashes from the end of the cigar.

"Where did this happen?"

"You know well enough. It is well we have met! I will have your vile life!"

A revolver gleamed in the right hand of the excited man. He drew back the hammer and thrust it almost against Colonel Cool's breast, crying with a kind of mad joy:

"Now I will be revenged! Your hour has come, villain!"

The Man from Santa Fe did not change color. He looked the young Easterner squarely in the eye, and not a nerve quivered.

"Shoot," he said, as calmly as if not menaced by a deadly danger—"shoot if you will. I shall die by a bullet from my own weapon."

He spoke the truth. The revolver in Ned Morgan's hand was the property of the man who stood before its muzzle. The young man remembered this, remembered how the man he was about to slay had thrown the hateful noose from his neck, remembered how he had thrust the weapon into his hand so he could defend himself against the drunken cowboys. Of a sudden the hand that held the deadly weapon shook a little.

Still Colonel Cool's clear eyes looked straight into those of the man who held the revolver, and there was not a sign of fear in their depths.

Ned Morgan felt the power of that steady gaze, felt his resolution slipping from him slowly and surely, felt a sudden weakness and sickness of heart.

The cool man's air was not that of bravado; there was something more—something deeper, something indescribable—about his appearance. It almost seemed as if he held his own life in his hands even when menaced by such deadly danger.

Up behind a mass of boulders several rods away man had been watching all that passed below and had distinctly heard nearly every word. He now gazed at Colonel Cool with a look of mingled hatred and admiration, while beneath his breath he muttered:

"Gods, what a nerve!"

Suddenly Ned Morgan's hand fell.

"You speak the truth," he hoarsely breathed. "This weapon is yours. I cannot kill you with it."

"Which is fortunate for me," easily smiled the Santa Fe Sport.

"Take it," and Ned flung the revolver at the colonel's feet. "I would not keep it in my possession another minute for the world!"

Colonel Cool picked up the weapon and examined it.

"All loaded," he murmured, "ready for business. A ball from that usually means death."

"Yes; and for one moment you stood on the very threshold of doom. My finger was ready to touch the trigger when something—I know not what—checked the pressure."

"And it is a hair trigger. In this case, as hundreds of times before, I stood within a hair of death. It is plain my time has not come." And he dropped the weapon into a convenient pocket.

"But your time is coming," said Ned, with

forced calmness. "I am not done with you yet. When next we meet, you may die."

"Doesn't it occur to you that I may have a score of chances to snuff you out before you get another such an opportunity at me? Even now I am armed and you are not. If I wished, I could easily dispose of you."

His words could not be disputed.

"But I have nothing against you," continued the cool man, once more blowing out a delicate ring of smoke and closing one eye while he watched the air slowly dissolve the vapory circle.

"You are young and hot-headed. The world is large, eternity is a long time, and you may yet learn that I am not so much your enemy as you think."

"She shall tell the truth," the young Easterner declared. "I will find her and learn the truth from her lips." And, without another word, he turned and hurried away toward Goodenough.

Colonel Cool stood and watched the young man as he hurriedly walked toward the town, and the sport's face was as unreadable as ever—impassive as that of a marble man. He spoke no word although he did not dream other ears besides his own were near enough to hear.

But when he turned to follow in Ned Morgan's footsteps a black-bearded man arose from behind the boulder and leveled a gleaming revolver at his back.

The eavesdropper was Black Rolf, the gambler!

"You get it this time!" hissed the dark-faced wretch.

But the would-be assassin's revolver was not discharged.

He heard a slight noise, and with a bitter oath of baffled hate, he once more sunk down behind the boulders just as Apache Nan appeared.

CHAPTER XXI.

"THE TRUE HEARTS."

It seemed that Apache Nan had also been listening. As he sunk behind the boulders, Black Rolf darted a dagger-like glance at the strange girl, and ground out a smothered oath.

"Curse her!" he hoarsely whispered. "If I should drop him, she would see it all. My only way to keep her still would be to put a bullet in her the instant I finished Randolph Myers—and I don't want a woman's blood on my hands."

So Colonel Cool went on, quite unconscious that Apache Nan had saved his life, and disappeared toward Goodenough. The girl followed at a distance, apparently not wishing to be seen.

When both man and girl had passed out of sight, the black-bearded man arose from behind the boulders, the revolver still clutched in his hand.

"And so you escape me again, murderer of my brothers!" he said, in a low, deep tone, in which was partially smothered a terrible hate, an undying thirst for vengeance. "I suppose I was a fool to let you slip from my fingers, but I thirst for more than your death. Your life cannot repay the red debt which you owe! If you die at once an easy death, I shall be foiled in a measure in my vengeance, but if I can torture you to death by inches, then my work will be complete."

He descended lightly from the rocks, and stood on the very spot Colonel Cool's feet had pressed a short time before.

"Three times the muzzle of this weapon covered his heart," and he lifted the heavy revolver till he could look fairly into the round, dark barrel. "I could have killed him while he talked with the veiled girl. I could have killed him as he calmly faced the excited young man with the revolver. Something restrained me then, something restrained me later. He has a wonderful nerve, yet, with the blood of poor Rael on his hands, he fled before us like the most pitiful coward. He knew we had sworn to hunt him to death, and many times the sight of the dagger-pierced heart filled him with horror. How he has changed!"

He lowered the hammer of the revolver, and thrust it into his belt beneath his coat, then continued, speaking aloud:

"Yes, he has changed. We followed him from place to place, and he fled before us. At times he would dream he was safe, had given us the slip forever, but even as he thus deluded himself, the sign of the dagger-pierced heart would fall before his eyes, and fill his heart with horror. Then he would flee again."

"But the time came when he turned on his pursuers, and from that moment he has been a man of stone, insensible to fear, insensible to any emotion, it almost seems. He turned and struck at his pursuers—struck with a knife, and left it buried to the guard in poor Falon's heart. I am left to avenge my brothers, and if he were a demon from the fire-reeking pit, I would have his life!"

He did not speak the final words loudly, but there was an intensity, a savageness, a heart-hatred in them that was blood-chilling.

"While hidden behind those rocks I hear things which I may be able to turn to account. In fact, I am sure I can do so. I believe I know just what that veiled girl is to Randolph Myers; I am sure I know what she is to the young fel-

low who held that man of ice beneath his own revolver. If I can lay hands on her, I think I can lure the slayer of my brothers into my clutches. Ha! ha! I have a scheme."

He turned sharply and walked directly from Goodenough, and as he went he muttered:

"I have a scheme, ha, ha! There are those who are ready to do my bidding for the money they love. I have a scheme! I have a scheme!"

He walked swiftly on for at least two miles, then he left the trail and scaled what seemed to be an almost perpendicular wall partially concealed by stunted trees and wild vines. Thirty feet above the valley he came to a narrow ledge where he could obtain a better foothold. The ledge wound onward and upward, and he followed it with strong steps. At length he reached what appeared to be an old path fallen into disuse, and this he followed.

Less than an hour later he found himself in a lonely valley, or pocket, amid the hills. Everything around him seemed weird, desolate, forbidding.

At one side of the pocket an old hut sat against the face of a cliff. This he approached, hearing the sound of voices some time before he rapped heavily on the door.

"Who's thar?"

The demand came from within, and he replied:

"A true heart."

Then the door was flung open and he was welcomed by the five rough inmates of the hut.

"Hello, Cap!" cried Rube the Crusher, whose face was not an agreeable thing to look at, all covered with cuts and bruises as it was. "We didn't 'spect ye back ser soon's this. W'at's it mean?"

"Business."

"I thought ez much. Suthin' new?"

"Yes."

"Suthin' as consarns ole Chain-Lightnin' Cool?"

"Yes."

"Whoop! I'm ready fer ennythin' as'll meck thet thar critter w'at guv me this yere beautiful mug wish he never wuz born. Oh, I love him, I do!"

It was a hard-looking crowd Black Rolf found himself with, but he had been there many a time and knew them all from Old Crooked Cale the hermit hunchback who had lived in the lonely hut years before Goodenough sprung into existence to Juan Gomez, the crafty Mexican who had as lief cut a throat as eat a square meal.

Four of the men had been playing cards at a rough table. The cards, some money and a half-emptied bottle were still on the table.

"Finish your game," said Rolf. "Then you can listen to me."

"Dern ther game!" growled Rube, who was ready to drop everything else to discuss plans against Colonel Cool, the man whom he hated so intensely.

But the others wished to finish the game, and so the Crusher resumed his place at the table.

When the playing was ended, Black Rolf arose and turned to the hunchback.

"Now, Cale, we will go to the Black Chamber. Is the door secure?"

"Dead fast, Cap."

"All right. Lead on."

The hunchback opened a heavy door set in a partition near the rear side of the hut and they entered a place of darkness. A smothered voice said:

"All take torches."

Whether the command was obeyed or not no mortal eye could have told. There was no reply, but many feet were heard treading over a stone floor, and the darkness was filled with echoes that told of an underground passage. Gradually the footsteps sunk in the distance, the echoes returned to silence, the lonely hut was as it appeared—deserted.

In a cavern chamber six black figures bearing flaring torches which shed a weird, fitful light over the scene were standing in a circle facing a common center. Every figure wore a black mask, from the bottom of which fell several niches of black cloth that completely concealed whatever beard they may have worn. On the cloth of each mask was stamped the representation of a human heart, blood-red in color.

A tall figure advanced on pace into the circle. "Brothers of the True Hearts," said Black Rolf's voice from beneath the mask, "we have met again in the Black Chamber."

He paused a moment, but no one spoke; then he resumed:

"We only meet here on the most important business concerning our League, and we never appear without our masks. Our rule is rigid in this respect. This is the chamber of death where we decide the fate of our foes. In this chamber not many hours ago we were unanimous in the decision that the man who calls himself Colonel Cool should die. He is the deadly enemy of one of our League and therefore the enemy of all. Is that right?"

As one, five voices responded from behind the black masks:

"It is."

"I have not called you here to go over that business again," the chief continued; "but I

have a plan to propose whereby we can lure the doomed one into our clutches. Although I have been your chief but a short time, since the death of your former leader, I think you have learned you can trust me. Am I right?"

"You are."

"I thought so. Now I feel I can lay my plan before you without being questioned as to how I know it will work. I am sure it will, that is enough. You have no need to ask what makes me sure. One thing I think we are decided on: we will never let one or more human beings or human lives stand between us and our intended victim."

"Never!" The black walls echoed the word solemnly.

"Since we were last in this chamber I have learned of a new way to reach Colonel Cool through parties who seem in no way connected with him. There is a man and there is a girl. We must make captives of them both."

"Name them, Cap," said the voice of Rube the Crusher.

"One is a young tenderfoot who appeared in Goodenough yesterday at about the same time Colonel Cool was first seen in the camp; he it was who was so nearly hanged by the cowboys."

"We know him."

"The other will not be so easy to find, but is the most important. She is sometimes seen in Goodenough wearing a veil. Without her, the capture of the tenderfoot would be useless."

"How shall we know her?"

"There is only one way—I shall have to point her out to some of you and you must not lose sight of her till you get a chance to perform your work. Are you ready to make the try?"

"All ready."

"I am pleased with your response. The captives must be brought here to this cave, blindfolded securely, for we shall not take their lives unless absolutely necessary. With them in my power I fancy I can lure our enemy to his doom. Then we may wish to release the tenderfoot and the girl. Now we will, with the usual custom, repeat our oath of devotion to the new purpose."

In unison they repeated a blood-chilling oath, their solemn voices echoing back hollowly from the black walls, each man holding the point of a dagger against the heart of the one who stood at his right side, while the flaring torches, held aloft in their left hands, shed a strange, uncertain light over the scene and caused grim shadows to leap and dance around the chamber like a maniac band of silent, joyous demons.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SOBER COWBOY.

THE voices of the oath-bound band were no longer heard in the cave, the footsteps of the masked league had died from echoes to silence in the distance of the underground passage, the flaring, fitful light of the torches was gone, in the Black Chamber slept the silent blankness of the tomb.

Within the old hut the rough men appeared once more with no masks on their faces.

"It is doubtful if you will be needed in Goodenough before night," said Black Rolf, speaking to his companions.

"I'm ready ter go back thar now," the Crusher hastened to declare.

"Very well; you may come with me. The others had better come in one at a time, as usual."

"You don't eggspect me ter huff it thar, does ye, Cap?" asked the hunchback.

"No, Cale; I do not fancy you will be needed, and I well know your aversion for leaving this lonely retreat."

"I hain't bin ter ther town but once since it started up thar."

"You are a hermit, old man. Well, good-by for the present, pards."

The Mexican responded:

"Hasta luego adios capitaine." (Till presently farewell, captain.)

Then Crooked Cale opened the door and the two men passed out.

But few words were exchanged between Black Rolf and his companion during the tramp back to Goodenough. The Crusher saw the other was thinking deeply, and for that reason restrained whatever desire to converse he may have felt.

They were almost in sight of the camp when Rube suddenly caught the black-bearded man by the arm, saying in a low tone:

"Look thar, boss!"

He pointed toward a man and a girl who were conversing together at a little distance.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Black Rolf.

"Nuthin'," replied Rube, in some confusion, "only fu'st squint I didn't know but them thar wuz ther birds we are lookin' fer."

"They are not."

"I kin see thet now."

"Then let's go on."

The two persons whom Rube had espied were Apache Nan and the reckless cowboy Holy Terror Tom. By accident Tom had come upon the strange girl.

"Allow me to thank you," he was saying, "for your prompt action yesterday."

Nan looked at him in surprise.

"W'at d'yer mean?" she asked.

"Just what I say. But for you the boys would have lynched the poor fellow whom they believed had killed me."

"Oh!"

"They told me how you stepped in and boldly faced them all with a cocked revolver, thus saving Ned Morgan's life, and I resolved to thank you for doing it."

"But I don't want ary thanks," she protested.

"You cannot escape them," laughed the cowboy. "I have come many miles to see you and Morgan. I was drunk yesterday."

She nodded but did not speak.

"But for that," he went on, watching her face admiringly, "there would have been no trouble between Morgan and me. I have no grudge against him; it's his old father I hate. Morgan may be a good enough fellow."

She tapped the ground nervously with one foot, keeping her eyes cast down.

"I shall hunt him out and tell him I am sorry for what passed between us, although he had the best of it in that encounter. It was afterward he was particularly misused. But for you he would have met death, and in words I cannot express my admiration for the bold stand you took in defending him."

"Then don't ye try."

"Well, I have one question to ask."

"Ask it."

"What is Morgan to you?"

Nan started and colored.

"Nuthin'," she replied.

The young cowboy watched her closely, a new light slowly dawning upon his mind.

"That is strange," he said, slowly.

"I dunno why it sh'd be," and she lifted her dark head defiantly.

"I thought he must be at least a friend for you to risk so much for him."

"I never risked nuthin'; cowboys don't ginerally hurt women."

"That is quite true, yet it is not one girl in a thousand who would thrust herself into the midst of a band of them who were excited by liquor and were about to hang a man whom they believed had killed one of their number—not one in a thousand."

Again she began tapping the ground with her foot, and he noticed a slight tremor of her chin.

"You do not mean to say that Morgan was an entire stranger to you when you placed yourself between him and death?" he ventured.

"If I don't, why don't I? You seem ter know it all." Nan was growing a bit angry.

"Well, it seems so strange."

"I dunno 'bout thet. W'u'd ye hev me kep' still an' seen er pore galoot stretch hemp fer nuthin'?"

"Of course not, but most women or girls would not have had the presence of mind and nerve to interfere."

"Wal, I hain't like most girls."

"I believe you."

"Thar hain't nuthin' fine nor eddycated 'bout me," she said, speaking rapidly and with increasing vehemence. "I hain't got no nice white han's and baby face, I hain't got no fine dresses an' jewelry, I don't know how ter read nor write, I don't know nuthin'! Luck's allus bin ag'in' me an' it's made me jest w'at I am. I hain't ter blame ef I hain't fit ter keep comp'ny with fine folks, but I know it is mighty hard on a gal, thet's all."

He fancied he understood it all. Words struggled to his lips, but he choked them back. It would not do to express pity to this dark-eyed passionate child of the wilds, for nothing would arouse her resentment so quickly. He knew not what to say, but he repeated some words mechanically about dresses and education not making the true lady.

"It's kind o' you ter say thet," said Nan, "but you don't understan' jest w'at I mean—you don't know all."

He thought he did.

"You are kind," the girl went on, "an' I like ye fer it. I won't fergit yer thanks, stranger. So long."

She waved her hand and turned away. If she had turned back she would have seen him watching her till she disappeared from sight. He little knew how great a change had taken place in her within the last twenty-four hours. She was no more like the wild, thoughtless, daring girl of the past than light is like darkness. Then she had scorned fine clothes, white hands and an education—thought such things were soft, silly, almost to be despised—but now her hot heart revolted against her own half-wild and ignorant condition. Yesterday she would have laughed at the finest lady in the land; to-day she wished she were a lady herself.

"A strange girl," muttered the cowboy, musingly. "There is a wild beauty about her that fascinates me. She is ignorant and somewhat uncouth, but I fancy there is a true woman's heart in her bosom. If she ever needs a friend, she can depend on Tom Heyward."

A short distance away his horse was standing. He uttered a sharp whistle and the animal came

running to his side. Then he sprung into the saddle and rode on to Goodenough.

It was not long after the cowboy had seen his horse carefully cared for before he came face to face with Ned Morgan. The young Easterner halted with a doubtful expression on his face, but Holy Terror Tom advanced with outstretched hand.

"Don't refuse to take it, Morgan!" he implored. "If you do, I shall feel like shooting myself on the spot and ending the job you so nearly completed yesterday."

Ned's face flushed and he grasped the extended hand.

"What does it mean, Tom?" he asked.

"That I am sober to-day," was the reply, "and heartily ashamed of my folly yesterday."

"I am glad you have not come for more trouble."

"Well, I have not, but I have come to ask your pardon."

"Which is granted with pleasure."

"And I feel better."

"If I had killed you with that mad shot—"

"You would not have been to blame. I forced you into it."

"I scarcely knew what I was doing."

"Then how like thunder you must shoot when you do know what you are doing," laughed the cowboy. "But for that locket you would have put the bullet straight through my heart. If you usually shoot better than that you must be a terror on trucks."

"But I did not really mean to shoot you. I had to do something."

"That is true; I forced you into it. I was half-drunk and allowed my old hatred for your father to get the best of me. Now that I am sober, I know well enough that your father's doings were not governed by his son. I suppose I knew that yesterday, but I was blind with passion. I have brooded over it all so much that I almost wonder I am not crazy."

"Well, I am glad there is to be no bad blood between you and me," said Ned.

"So am I. They call me Holy Terror Tom out here, and I am generally considered a pretty hard case even among the boys, but my heart is not all bad by any means."

"I believe you, Tom."

"Let's go into the saloon here and talk over old times. I have a hundred questions to ask you. I believe you said yesterday that you do not drink? Well, we are not obliged to take anything but a seat, which will be free."

The cowboy linked his arm with the young Easterner's, and in that manner they entered the Wanderer's Home, appearing like two boon companions.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CRUSHER CRUSHED.

FOR an hour they talked like two old schoolmates who had met after years of separation and banishment from each other's companionship.

"I tell you, Morgan," Tom finally said, "it has done me a heap of good to meet you to-day. I feel like a different man, for despite the past and the record of yesterday, you meet me as if I am a man not entirely debased."

"Hayward," was Ned's earnest response, as he looked the young cowboy fairly in the face, "the past is behind you. The future is yours and will be just what you choose to make it."

"But what can I do?" with a frown and a sharp gesture of despair. "You do not know my situation. You are a tenderfoot and know little of this wild land and the wild life which its people lead. If my surroundings were different—"

"But there are good and true men in this wild country—there must be!"

"To be sure there are, as noble men as ever breathed God's pure air. Here when a man is true to himself and has the power to resist the temptations which are sure to beset him, he rises to the very pinnacle of manhood, he is usually bold as a god and as tender-hearted as a woman; but when he has not the power to resist, he is sure to sink to the lowest depth of vice and sin, and his heart will become so black no crime however vile will cause it to shudder or feel pity."

"Your ideas are rather forcible, to say the least."

"But correct. I have seen enough of life in the Southwest to know just what it is."

"But you are not yet drawn into the whirlpool that will carry you down. You may be lingering on the edge, but you are not in the grasp of the swirl."

"Ah, you do not know! I am always in the clutch of a terrible habit that I fear will be my ruin."

"What is it?"

"The habit of drinking! You cannot know what a grip it has on me. Nearly every one drinks out here and I have conformed myself with the ways of the land. I love liquor, I hate it! Every day I feel the accursed habit growing on me. When I have been drinking I am a very fiend within and I only restrain myself by the most powerful effort. Restrain myself!—in this I only succeed in a measure, and gradually my strength to do so is growing feebler. That

accounts for my mad act yesterday; that is why my mates call me Holy Terror Tom."

A feeling of sympathy, of pity for the handsome young cowboy took possession of the one who listened to his words. He thrust his open hand across the table in silent sympathy and Tom grasped it, a mist in his eyes, fully understanding the unspoken expression. After a brief silence, Ned said:

"You must go away, Tom—must leave this land, your wild companions and your past life behind you."

"Where shall I go?"

"The world is large, but first you must go back to Corydon."

"No, no! Morgan, you are jesting! I cannot go back there, I would be arrested the moment I stepped into the town."

"You would not. Cyrus Bent, whose buildings you burned, is dead; my father will not pick up the past of several years ago. I will pledge my word for your safety."

For a long time Tom sat staring straight into Ned Morgan's face, his working features telling of a hundred emotions within his breast. At length he caught his breath convulsively and shook his head with a faint, sad smile.

"No, I will not go back there now. As you say, the world is large. I know not what the future may deal me. I may change my whole course in life, or I may keep on to the bitter end. For the present I shall remain at the Double Bar Ranch, but I shall not forget this little talk. How long do you remain in Goodenough?"

"Till my business is ended—perhaps a week, perhaps a day."

"So uncertain? Well, will you not go back to the ranch with me? I will show you a bit of life there."

"I regret to decline, but I must do so."

"I am sorry, but I may see more of you yet. The day is spoiled, and I shall not set out for the ranch till nightfall. Just now I will hunt up a certain old Jew whom I owe a small sum of money. Fortunately for him, I have the money in my pocket and feel in the mood to pay him."

They shook hands again and parted.

Shortly after the saloon, Ned was passed on the street by the Lucky Pard. He saw the velvet celebrities of Goodenough for the first time, and he gave a start of surprise as his eyes fell on Silent Sid's face.

"Good heavens!" he softly exclaimed.

Then he followed them along the street like one walking in a dream.

The Crusher had been in town long enough to complete the job of filling himself with bad liquor. He saw the Pard and bolted out of a saloon in an ugly mood, planting himself directly in their way.

"Hold on yere!" he cried, adding with an oath: "you two are jest ther leetle runts I've bin lookin' fer."

"Stand aside, you big ruffian!" came sharply from Dandy Duce's lips.

"Nary stan," was the retort, as the bully jerked out a revolver and menaced the little sports with it. "I'm hyer on business—ole business from ther word Go."

"Let us pass."

"No lettee, allee samee. I've got ther drapan' I'm goin' ter hold it some. If you 'tempt ter draw, yere dead sart'in sure ter be perforated, so go light."

"What do you want?"

"Thar, now you are talkin' business! I'm hyer fer sattersfacshun."

"For what?"

"Sattersfacshun—drat it tall! kan't ye understan' good clean United States? Thar hain't no Kunnel Cool hyar now ter step atwixt you an' me an' take yer part, so I'm jest eternally goin' ter chaw ye up—whup ther life outen ye."

Dandy Duce smiled.

"You big fool," he said, quietly, "you do not dream how sizable a job you have laid out."

"W'at's thet?" and the bully fairly danced with rage. "Do you durst call me er fool, you littlerat? I'll fall on ye an' squot ye outer existence!"

A crowd was rapidly collecting, despite the fact that the laboring class of the camp were hard at work.

Ned Morgan had obtained a position where he could look both of the Lucky Pards fairly in the face, and he stood staring at them like a person suddenly dazed. From the face of Silent Sid his eyes sprung to that of Dandy Duce, and a puzzled, excited look crept upon his features.

With the gathering crowd Big Fist Mose appeared.

"Wherefore are assembled all this great concourse?" he cried, making his way to the center. "Oh-ho!" striking an attitude in front of the Crusher, "behold the noble warrior and look upon that classic phiz erst used as a battering-ram, or the dents and humps all over it do bear false witness. By me trusty blade! that is a perfect map of Arkansas!"

"You git out!" snarled Rube, casting a savagance at the big man. "Ef you want any thing of me, you kin hev it w'en I've chawed up these two slick little runts."

"So soon? Then fear I much I shall never get a chance to make an addition to that map."

Such averse fortune might well discourage one's very soul. Reuben, have you made your will?"

But the bully pretended he did not hear.

"Come, you little cuss!" he cried, shaking the revolver under Dandy's nose, "peel off thet coat. I'm goin' ter whup ye."

Silent Sid caught the weapon by the barrel and snatched it with one sharp, twisting motion from the Crusher's hand. Then he flung it at the bully's feet, at the same time producing a revolver of his own.

A little cheer and a laugh came from the crowd as they saw the silent man's clever movement. Rube looked dazed.

"Slow up there," came plainly from Sid's lips. You are looking into my revolver just now, and it makes a big difference. Neither of us are fools enough to fight you with our fists, like prize-fighters, but as you are bound to fight, and we are the offended ones, a pistol duel it shall be. I always settle all difficulties of this nature, and I am ready to shoot you as soon as you wish."

"Oh, glad am I to live and witness this!" murmured Big Fist.

The bully protested he did not wish to fight in such a manner, but Sid insisted.

"We have got to teach you a lesson sooner or later," said the silent man, "and it may as well be now as any time. You are spoiling for a row, so brace up."

"Yes, brace up, Reuben," advised the tonguey giant. "Methinks I hear several in the crowd observe they will run a tunnel in your system if you take water now. Oh, Reuben! show us the kind of whalebone there is in thy spinal column!"

The Crusher heard the muttered threats of the crowd and felt there was no escape. His heart was not thirsting for such dangerous work, however; he had thought to give one or both of the Lucky Pards a brutal beating.

"Blame ye both!" he snarled, as he stooped to pick up his revolver. "I'll wipe ye clean out for this!"

"That's right, Reuben," nodded Big Fist Mose, as he drew and cocked his huge revolver; "but do not think of trying anything crooked. I am right about here somewhere, and my gun is with me. When a fellow gets hit with something out of this yere, he always imagines he has run against a cannon-ball. That so discourages him that he lays right down and dies without even stopping to breathe his last."

Arrangements were quickly made and the two men, Rube and Silent Sid, stood facing each other at twenty paces, revolvers in hand. Big Fist Mose gave the signal, and it seemed that both weapons spoke together.

"Ah!"

The cry came from the spectators. Silent Sid remained standing untouched; but the bully's revolver fell at his feet. Then Rube uttered a great groan and held up a shattered, bloody hand.

"The fun is finished," said Big Fist Mose, "and the great Crusher is crushed."

CHAPTER XXIV.

EXAMINING THE REGISTER.

THE duel had been brief, and although no one was killed, every one seemed quite ready to call it finished. All the blow and bluster was completely gone from the Crusher, and he looked quite white and limp as he gazed in horror at his bullet-shattered hand, which never again could be a very ornamental, not to say useful, member.

"What, ho!" shouted Big Fist Mose, as he restored his revolver to its holster. "On this ensanguined field a most skillful surgeon should be. There is need of his labor."

The big man at once hastened to the wounded bully's side.

"Plain my eyes doth say thou art hit, noble sir; I see the red blood leave its stain upon the soil at thy feet. Wilt accept my proffered aid and sympathy?"

But the Crusher could not reply because of a great sob that swelled up in his throat and choked him; he threatened to cry like a child that has fallen and injured itself.

"Oh, come now!" exclaimed Mose, who had a queerly sympathetic heart in his bosom. "This will never do, Reuben! For heaven's sake don't let the gang see your under lip shake so, like a reed agitated by a strong breeze! They will laugh at you—brace up!"

"It's all right fer you ter say 'Brace up,'" mumbled Rube; "but jest looker thet han'—it's ruined ferever! W'en it gits well it won't be fit even ter punch er Chinaman with. My reppy-tashun as 'ther Crusher' is gone ferever!"

"Well, it is better to have a bullet in the hand than to have the same in one's heart. You have much to be thankful for, my dear sir."

"Dunno 'bout thet; I'd most as lief hev bin hit ennywhar ez in thet thar fin. W'at d'I keer 'bout livin' w'en my usefulness is clean bu'sted?"

"You are inclined to look on the darkest side, Reuben. But what is finished is usually ended, so there is no such thing as getting out of the scrape now. You got the wrong shote by the ear that time. As it is, you had better let me

bind up this bleeding paw in my handkerchief, and together we will search for a slasher or a pill-man."

And strangely enough, the bully did not object. The fight seemed quite taken out of him. Big Fist carefully knotted the handkerchief around the bleeding member, and then hurried Rube away to find some one who could give it the proper care, going along with the fallen "chief," to render such assistance as he could.

Silent Sid had not been touched, although he heard a "swish" as the bully's bullet flew past his ear.

Breathlessly Ned Morgan had witnessed it all, a kind of wild excitement and fear being smothered within his throbbing heart. He longed to leap forward and interfere, but he well knew the folly of such a move, and so he restrained himself. He felt sure that the little man in velvet would be bit, and the thought filled his soul with an indescribable horror. To his lips surged a familiar name, and once or twice he came near shrieking it aloud. Then his eyes fell on the calm, impassive face of Dandy Duce, who was quietly watching proceedings, and the feeling of horror was mingled with one of doubt and mystification.

But it was all over at last; the silent man was uninjured, thank God!

Sid joined Dandy Duce, their eyes met, they spoke no word.

As Big Fist Mose conducted the wounded bully away, the Lucky Pards turned to depart. Ned Morgan stood before them.

"Hold on a moment," he said, his voice shaking strangely. "I want to speak with you two."

The Pards looked at him in surprise, genuine or assumed, then Dandy said sharply:

"We have no time to waste. If you are a friend of Rube the Crusher you had better be looking after him. One fight in a forenoon is all my pard cares to attend to, but we will accommodate you later in the day."

"But I do not want—"

He stopped; they had pushed past him and were walking away side by side. A hot flush colored his face, driving before it all his recent pallor. He stood and watched them.

"Two little rustlers," he heard a voice say close by.

"Bet your boots!" enthusiastically agreed a second.

"They kin tek car' of theirselves."

"Now you're shouting."

"Ther Crusher got off easy."

"He did that."

"Silent cuss might jest ez easy put ther bullet through his heart ef he'd keered ter."

"I reckon."

"Whar d' they hang out?"

"At Hotel Goodenough."

Ned heard the words vaguely, but the final question and answer gave him a start. He would follow the Pards.

"I must know more about them," he thought.

Keeping the two velvet-attired figures in sight, he followed them along the street until the big, barn-like building known as "Hotel Goodenough" was reached. The twin sports entered, passing a man who was complacently smoking a fragrant cigar.

It was Colonel Cool.

Ned walked past the hotel, then, with a sudden resolve, he turned back and passed beneath the rough sign-board on which the name building was spelled in this original manner:

"HOTIL GudENuF."

Colonel Cool gave the young Easterner a queer glance, but Ned passed on without appearing to notice the Man from Santa Fe.

Passing through an open door that stood at his right as he entered, he found himself in a combined office and bar-room, which was occupied by half-a-dozen persons. A glance showed him the Lucky Pards were not there.

At one end of the bar lay a ragged open book which he rightly surmised was the hotel register. He at once decided to examine it.

"What will you have?" was the barkeeper's question.

"Nothing now, thank you," he replied, understanding he was expected to drink; "but I would like to examine this book."

The barkeeper looked at him a bit surlily and growled:

"All right."

Ned opened the ragged book, the leaves of which were torn and stained in a shocking manner. He at once sought the record of the previous day, and almost the first name that fell beneath his eyes was written in a strong, bold hand with just the least hint at a flourish. It read:

"Colonel I. C. E. Cool, Santa Fe."

Close after it some one had written:

"Room 14."

The young man smiled; he could not help it. There was something amusing about the combination, and yet he thought he never yet had seen a man with a name more appropriate. For coolness and nerve not one man in a thousand could hold a candle to the strange individual upon whose writing he was looking.

He ran back in the register, examining care-

fully the record of each day's arrivals. It was some time before he found what he was searching for, and even then he was not sure he had made no mistake. This was what he read:

"Two Pards, Texas. Room 13."

He felt it must be the register of the Lucky Pards but he was disappointed. With the exception of the room and number, which were in another hand, the writing was strong and masculine. There was nothing familiar about it that he could see.

"Is it possible I am all adrift?" was his mental question. I was never in my life so puzzled and tortured before."

He was not satisfied and continued his search, but, besides what he had already observed, the only thing in the book which attracted his attention was this, written in a cramped and—so he fancied—unnatural hand:

"Unknown, from Nowhere. Room 12."

"Unknown, from Nowhere," he mentally repeated. "Now that is singular. I wonder who Unknown is and whether man or woman. That writing is a woman's I believe, and—Ha!"

He bent over the book, eagerly and excitedly gazing at the writing, a sudden wild fancy having seized him.

"By heavens!" flashed through his brain, "it has a resemblance! I believe the person who wrote this attempted to disguise their natural style of penmanship, and I am almost sure I detect something familiar in this."

For a time he was greatly excited. He glanced at the barkeeper with the intention of questioning the fellow but the cold look of that important individual checked his words.

"I understand," thought Ned; "I have not made myself popular here yet after the usual manner." Then he turned to the loafers present, saying: "Excuse me, gentlemen, but this is a dry day. I am a tenderfoot who never drinks, but all the same I would like to have you all take something at my expense."

"Pard, we're thar, uvery time."

It was amusing to see with what alacrity the six men ranged themselves in front of the bar and called for their "usual;" it was amusing to see the pleasant smile that chased the cold look from the barkeeper's face.

"Hyer's ter ther tenderfut as know's his biz an' has tlier manners uv an ole-timer. Uvery galoot h'ist."

When the liquor was drank, the bill settled and the six loafers had retired, wiping their mouths, Ned ventured to speak to the barkeeper.

"I would like to ask a little information, if you can spare me a few moments."

"Certainly, sir; with pleasure, sir," and the fellow put on his most agreeable smile.

"I notice on the book here 'Two Pards, Texas—Room 13.' Who are they, and are they still here?"

"They are Dandy Duce and Silent Sid, called the Lucky Pards, in camp, and they are still here."

"Thank you. Another question: I see here 'Unknown, from Nowhere,' and I am curious to know who signs himself or herself so strangely?"

"Now you have got me," the barkeeper admitted. "It is a 'herself' in this case, but I can tell you very little about her. She appeared the day after the Lucky Pards arrived in town, but how she got here no one seems to know. Certain it is she did not come in on the regular stage. Whether she is a young woman or a girl less than twenty I cannot say, for when she entered the hotel she wore a heavy veil which concealed her face completely, and since being here she has never appeared otherwise. No man in Goodenough can say he has seen her face, I believe."

Ned's heart gave a great leap and then throbbed with startling rapidity. He was on the right track without a doubt.

CHAPTER XXV.

SOCORRO JIM DETECTS A RESEMBLANCE.

"Do you see this veiled Unknown often?"

"She appears very seldom; indeed, she stays in her room with astonishing persistence. She has her meals carried to the room, but she doesn't eat enough to keep a child alive."

Ned nodded with satisfaction.

"Is there a connecting door between rooms 12 and 13?"

The barkeeper stared at the questioner in amazement.

"Well—I—guess—not!" was his reply.

"What are you driving at anyhow?"

"I thought perhaps the strange woman might be a friend of the Luck Pards."

"Well, I reckon you're 'way off there. Never to my knowledge has she been seen speaking to either of them."

"Do you know that she has been seen by any one at the same time both of the pards were visible?"

"No." Plainly the barkeeper was puzzled to understand what the young man was driving at.

"What kind of a partition separates rooms 12 and 13?"

"One of common boards."

"Thank you. I am not going to question you to death, but can you give me a room directly opposite either the one occupied by the Pards or that selected by the lady?"

After short consideration, the combined barkeeper and clerk replied:

"I can let you have one opposite that of the Pards. The one opposite the lady's room is occupied."

"That will do. I will take the room and pay you for three days in advance. I shall stop at this hotel the remainder of the time I am in Goodenough."

The matter was soon settled and Ned was directed to his room. He at once ascended the unsteady stairs, found himself in a rather dark corridor at the end, but succeeded in singling out his room.

He was already familiar with the general appearance of hotel rooms in new mining-camps and he found nothing unusual in this one. The walls were of rough unplanned boards, there was no furniture save a rude hand-made bedstead on which was a scant amount of bedding indeed. But he was used to roughing it.

"Now," he muttered, when he was fairly alone within the room—"now to solve the mystery. I am going to get at the very bottom of this whole strange business, then some one shall suffer. There are hot times coming."

So he set himself down to watch and wait. It was not a pleasant task by any means, for his soul was burning with impatience, but he felt nothing could be gained by too much haste in the case so perplexing to him.

The forenoon watch was fruitless.

At dinner Ned found himself opposite Colonel Cool. The Man from Santa Fe was as placid in manner as ever. Ned was nervous.

"So you have become one of us," said the colonel, at the end of the meal.

The young man nodded. He resolved not to show any ill will toward the other then. If he obtained proof that Cool was what he thought, then there would be bloodshed.

"I fancy I understand your lay," observed the colonel. "You will find you have set out to solve a difficult enigma."

"But I will solve it in time!" The words escaped Ned's lips ere he thought what he was saying.

"I hope so," assured the sport, with apparent sincerity. "I would like to do the same, and I mean to in the end."

Their eyes met; Ned said:

"You are the man!"

Colonel Cool knew what he meant.

"Let's forget that for the present," he begged.

"Just now we are working toward the same end. If you find you are right about me, you will then have plenty of time to square the account."

What a strange creature the man was!

"If I find I am right," and the young Easterner leaned over the table to look the other square in the eye, "I shall finish the work I left undone to-day!"

"A proper caper, young man; but till that time comes I wish we might be friends. Someway I rather like you, you know."

The proposition struck Ned as ridiculous.

"I will be frank with you, I cannot say as much in turn, for I do not like you. We can never be friends under any circumstances."

"I am truly sorry, but suppose the matter cannot be helped. We all have our likes and dislikes, many of which creep upon and take possession of us without our being conscious when it happens. But I fancy I know why you do not like me. I have stood in an unenviable position before you. Well, let it go. What does it all amount to anyway? I have no hard feelings against you, and I admire your frankness. By-and-by we may understand each other better."

Ned fancied he detected a sad cadence in the man's voice, but at the end Cool smiled as pleasantly as ever. They did not talk more.

The Lucky Pards did not appear while Ned was in the dining-room, but he met them as he passed out. Neither of them appeared to notice him.

At the outer door he met Tom Hayward just coming in for dinner. They greeted each other pleasantly, and spoke of meeting later.

While Ned was standing in front of the hotel, Colonel Cool came out smoking a cigar and passed down the street. The young man watched the elegant figure till it disappeared, then he turned back into the hotel and ascended the stairs to his room.

"It may be folly," he muttered, "but I mean to thoroughly test it, before I give it up."

So the day slipped away.

Late in the afternoon Ned detected a rustle like that made by a woman's dress at his door. The next moment he stepped out into the corridor and was just in time to see a veiled female disappearing into Room 12, much to his disappointment.

"A moment too late!" he muttered.

He was seized by an impulse to rap upon the door—to demand admittance—to burst it open and enter by force. He trembled from head to foot with the desire, but with a mighty effort he

crushed it and turned away, closing his own door behind him.

At the head of the stairs he paused and looked back. He was standing thus when the door of Number 13 opened and one of the Lucky Pards came out. It was dark in the passage, but the little sport came forward at once and passed down the stairs.

It was Dandy Duce.

Ned Morgan smote his clinched hands together, whispering with intense satisfaction:

"That is enough—that settles it! I now understand which is which. My time has not been wasted."

Excitedly he descended the stairs. At the foot he met Old Socorro Jim, who was nodding and muttering to himself in a singular manner. The old man at once seized Ned's arm.

"You're ther very pusson I'm lookin' arter," he declared.

Ned glanced out at the door, but found Dandy Duce had disappeared.

"Another time will do," he thought.

"Yes, I wuz jest lookin' fer ye," the old man repeated. "I s'pected you'd be strikin' back fer ther shanty 'fore this, er blamed long time. W'at d'yer mean by stayin' away?"

"I have decided to stop here at the hotel."

"Oh, come now, thet never'll do, young feller! W'at d'yer mean ter say—thet ye hain't comin' back a tall?"

"Oh, no! I meant to see you before I left town and pay you for your kindness and hospitality."

"Oh, ye did, did ye?" sneered Old Jim, with sudden indignation. "Ye meant ter pay us, did ye? W'at d'yer take us fer?"

"Why—why?"

"I'll be jizzled!" piped the excited old fellow. "Thet's w'at I will—I'll be jizzled! Meant ter pay us! Young man, *we don't run no hotel!*"

"I am well aware of that, but you have been to considerable trouble on my account, and—"

"No trouble at all. Did ye think fer one d'ned onery jerk o' time that we'd take pay fer w'at we done?"

"Well, then I meant to call round and thank you."

"Thet soun's better, an' you'd stud a d'ned sight bigger chainece o' gittin' away without hevin' yer back bruck. Course we want ter see ye. I dunno ez I asked ye ter come back, but I shorely thought ye wuz comin'."

"To be honest with you, in pursuit of the business that called me to Goodenough, it is necessary that I should stop at this hotel, a fact which I discovered since I parted with you this morning."

"Wal, ef thet's so, I s'pose we can't kick. But how's yer shoulder an' yer head?"

Ned laughed.

"To tell the honest truth, I do not believe I have thought of either to-day. Now that you speak of them, I am aware that my shoulder is somewhat stiff and sore and my head feels far from natural; but I am all right."

"Waal, I'm glad ter hear that. It makes me feel better, an' w'en I tell Nan she won't worry 'bout ye no more. She thought as how p'raps you wuz kinder crazy like ye wuz las' night an' hed roamed off somewhar. But I have got suthin' I'd like ter say ter ye whar nobody'd hear it."

"Come up into my room."

"Nary. Rooms hev ears, 'specially hotel rooms. Come erlong with me."

Together they walked along till they came to a place where Socorro Jim thought there was little danger of their conversation being overheard.

"I don't want you ter think I'm pryin' inter your business," the old man began, looking a bit confused, "beca'se I don't keer hoot in *Helena* w'at it is, but I can't help s'pectin' it's suthin' connected with ther vailed gal w'at we both saw las' night. Now you know thet w'en thet tough yanked off her vail we hed a good squar' look at her face. Then you skooted arter her."

"Go on," said Ned, quietly:

"Waal, w'at I want ter say is this: Thar's somebody in thish yere town as looks ernough like her ter be her ef thar wuzn't any beard on his face."

Ned started, his heart giving a great throb. This old man had never seen her face but once; could it be that he had penetrated the same secret which now seemed quite plain to the young Easterner? With smothered excitement, Ned asked:

"Who is this somebody you speak of, Jim?"

"Dandy Duce," was the reply.

CHAPTER XXVI.

APACHE NAN ON HAND.

FOR some reason Ned felt disappointed. The old man had not hit it just right, after all.

"I reckon thet thar Dandy looks ernough like ther gal ter be her own twin brother," continued the old scout, somewhat surprised that the statement made no more impression on his companion. "Ef Dandy wuzn't er man, he'd be er mighty fine gal."

"I believe you are right about that."

"Right—to be course I be! An' more nor thet, I hev some mighty singular s'pishuns."

"As to what?"

"As ter thet leetle velvet sport."

"What are they?"

"Waal, in ther fu'st place, his v'ice hain't allus like er man's natterally is—not yit like er boy's. But, by smoke! it *düz* soun' mighty sight like er feemale's, at times!"

Ned nodded, but did not speak.

"Hain't ye noticed it, lad?"

"You must know I have seen very little of the Lucky Pards."

"Fact—I never thought o' thet."

"I saw them the first time since leaving your cabin this morning."

"So? Waal, ye hain't hed much chance ter look ther critters over, thet's er fact. But I reckon you'll fine w'at I've said is jest erbout so. An' ernother thing I hev noticed 'bout Dandy."

"What is it?"

"His figger. Ef my ole eyes hain't playin' ther very Dickens an' all with me, then thet leetle galoot's figger hain't natteral."

"You think—"

"Thet it's partly made up, b'gash!"

"Perhaps you're right."

"I'm bettin' hard rocks as how I am. Ef them shoulders o' his'n hain't built up squar', an' his waist hain't padded, I don't know my ole head from er jiggertwizzle, by crick!"

Old Jim was growing excited and emphatic, for Ned's manner of receiving this assertion was disappointing. He had expected the young man would be both amazed and excited, but Ned seemed rather disappointed than otherwise.

"More'n thet," Jim continued, "his han's are small, like er woman's. Boys tuck him fer er sickly dude w'en he struck thish yere town, an' they jest tried ter crawl all over both o' ther leetle sardines, but 'twuzn't no go. They kin fight, ef one is er feemale."

"I have seen a little of their ability in that line."

With considerable interest the old man listened to Ned's story of the encounter between the Pards and Rube the Crusher.

"Thet's it," he cried, "ther silent one 'most allus takes ther resk an' düz ther fightin', though I hev seen Dandy fight like er cat."

"Then there is nothing sure about it—nothing can be judged from the fact that Sid usually does the fighting."

"I dunno 'bout thet," said the old fellow, doggedly. "Er man is usually ther one who düz thet kind o' work."

"I once knew a woman who was a dead shot with a pistol and who had the nerve to face any danger."

Jim cast a swift glance into the speaker's face, understanding well enough that Ned was searching for that woman in Goodenough.

"Then you kinder callate thet—"

"I have decided on nothing. But did you ever notice the same peculiarities about Silent Sid that you have spoken of in connection with Dandy Duce?"

"Ther same *which*?"

"The same feminine appearance about his hands, shoulders, waist? Did you ever think his clothes were padded?"

"No, I never looked cluss ernough," the scout confessed. "Fact is, I never smelt ther rat erbout Dandy tell ter-day an' I hain't hed no chance ter squint t'other 'un over."

"When you do, I think you will find another puzzle. The mystery is not fully solved yet by any means, but I thank you for your interest and trouble. I appreciate it all, old man."

Their hands met.

"Waal, I hope ye will succeed in yer business, young feller. Ye mustn't fergit ter come ter ther cabin afore ye leave thish yere town."

"I will not. Remember me to Nan. She was so brave and kind! I shall never forget her."

With a few more words, they parted, Ned turning back toward the hotel, while Old Jim made his way directly toward the cabin which he called home.

"D'ned queer!" he muttered several times, when he was fairly beyond the limits of the camp. "It's 'bout ther sing'lerst piece o' business ever I knowed. Waal, waal! I reckon thar's goin' ter be some strange things come out o' it all."

As he was moving along the little valley or ravine he heard the sound of voices and suddenly halted.

"Someun' talkin' keerful like," he thought. "Wonder who it kin be."

Cautiously he worked his way forward till he could see three men who were speaking with each other in low tones. One of them he recognized as the Colorado gambler, Black Rolf, and another was the Mexican, Juan Gomez. The third appeared to be a ruffian of the lowest grade but was unknown to the scout. The three men seemed somewhat excited, and he could understand much they said, guarded though they spoke.

"*El diablo!*" cried the Mexican, softly. "What is this you tell us? The Crusher is hurt?"

"Yes," replied Rolf, "quite used up, curse the luck! He was fool enough to pick a quarrel with those two young tiger cats."

"An' they both got ther best of him!" from the third ruffian.

"No, one of them alone got the best of him."

"*Caramba!*"

"How bad is he hurt, Cap?"

"His right hand is useless, and it is doubtful if it ever amounts to anything again."

"Thet's bad!"

"Fiends of fury! I should say it is bad! This happens just when every man is needed."

"That's true."

"Rube is a good man, and counts in such work as we have on hand for to-night."

"The fool drinks too much," declared the Mexican.

"You are right about that, Juan; but for that he would be of untold value to the League."

"Waal, w'at we goin' ter do, Cap?"

"We must do the work without him."

"We can."

"Of course we can. It is not going to be so difficult."

"Waal, you may look fer us ter be on han'—eh, Juan?"

"*Si, señor!*"

"All right."

Jim saw they were about to separate, and with remarkable agility he ran lightly and swiftly back along the trail for some distance, then he turned back again at a slow walk, and soon met Black Rolf. The gambler looked at the old man sharply, a bit suspiciously, but passed on without uttering a word.

"Wonder w'at deviltry they're up ter," muttered Jim, as he slowly climbed the difficult path. "It's suthin', but I didn't jest drap ter w'at it is. Wish I hed, I might 'a' bin able ter block their game."

He found Nan standing in the door waiting for him. She looked pale and anxious.

"Seemed like you'd never come, Daddy," she said.

"Come jest ez soon's I c'u'd, leetle one," he asserted. "I hain't got no wings now, but I 'spect ter hev er pair putty soon, ef I don't go ter ther wrong place. I'm gittin' 'bout ole ernough ter turn toes ter ther johnny-jump-ups."

"Don't talk thet way, Daddy! I don't like ter hear ye!"

"All right, little one, all right. I dunno but 'tis a sort o' *grave* jokin'."

"Did you find *him*?"

"Yep. Jest come inside whar we kin squat an' I'll tell ye all erbout it."

Nan was eager to hear, and she looked greatly relieved when he assured her Ned was all right. He filled and lighted his pipe as he told her what had passed since he left the cabin. She listened closely, deeply interested.

"An', so you think Dandy Duce is er woman in disguise an' is ther very one ther young feller is lookin' fer?"

"Thet is jest w'at I think. Your eyes are putty sharp; I'd thought you'd seen she wuzn't no man afore this."

"Waal, ter be hones', Daddy, I never tuck er second look at ther Lucky Pards."

"Ef ye had, you'd seen it," decisively nodded Old Jim, rolling out great volumes of smoke. "It's jest ez plain."

"Ef thet's so, I sh'u'd think all Goodenough w'u'd diskivered it long 'go."

"So sh'u'd I, an' thet's jest what puzzles me. I don't see how we c'u'd be wooled so."

"P'raps 'tain't plain ez you think."

"Oh, yes it is, yes it is!" piped Jim, nodding his head in short sharp, jerks several times.

Nan said no more, but began to prepare supper. Old Jim fell into a fit of silent musing and was only aroused when she called him to the table.

He soon noticed Nan was not eating anything. "Oh, come now!" he cried. "This 'll never do! I never knew you ter miss a meal afore, 'cept w'en ye hed ther fever an' I nussed ye roun'. You've got ter eat or flop. Goin' without reg'ler fodder's ag'in' human nater."

"Don't ask me ter eat now, Daddy," she entreated. "I can't! But I'll come ter it bumby."

He said no more, but he was troubled and uneasy.

Twilight came—darkness fell.

The old man arose from the corner where he had been sitting since supper.

"I'm goin' down ter ther camp, leetle one. I reckon thar's goin' ter be warm times down thar to-night."

Nan did not speak, and he went out, leaving her alone in the darkness with her bitter thoughts.

For a long time the girl sat there in silence, but at length she cried hoarsely:

"I can't help it—I can't, I can't! I know I'm er fool, but I can't help it! How my heart burns!"

She sprang to her feet.

"I'm goin' ter town," she said. "I want ter find this woman as run away from *him*. W'at kin she be made of! I'll hev ter guard merself ef we meet ur I'll hev my han's on her throat."

By the aid of a dim light she discovered and took from a peg a leather cartridge belt to which were attached two holsters containing heavy revolvers. She fastened the belt around her

waist, then removed each of the revolvers and examined them closely to make sure they were loaded and in good working order. Satisfying herself on that point, she thrust them back into the holsters, placed a glazed sombrero on her head and extinguished the light.

In a remarkably short space of time the girl was in Goodenough.

"Ther Lucky Pards stop at Hotel Goodenough," she murmured. "I'm goin' thar."

For some reason she did not go boldly down the main street, but approached the hotel from the rear. As she came near the barn-like structure a back door opened and a female figure stepped out into the darkness.

Barely had the woman left the doorway when two black figures leaped up on either side and seized her. There was a smothered shriek, a low oath, a struggle.

Snatching one of the heavy revolvers from its holster, Apache Nan leaped forward, uttering a genuine Indian yell.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NAN AND THE VAILED UNKNOWN.

THE act was one of instinct, not reasoning, and sprung from a fearless soul.

A human being had been basely and unexpectedly attacked by overpowering numbers and was in great danger—that was enough for Nan.

Uttering that wild war-cry, she hurled herself through the darkness into the struggle, an unexpected element.

Her heavy revolver was ready for use and she used it. The loud, half-muffled report was followed by a cry of pain and one of the ruffians who had seized the woman fell in his tracks.

That was too much for the other.

"*Quien es?*" he snarled—"el diablo?"

Then he released the woman and ran for his life.

Apache Nan could have shot him dead as he ran, but she was satisfied to send a bullet singing past his ear.

"Go it, you treacherous Greaser!" she yelled, with a wild burst of laughter that was natural to her when she was excited in such a manner. "Your master, *el diablo*, will git ye in ther eend sure enough."

The other wretch lay on the ground, groaning with pain, plainly far from dead although hard hit.

The woman who had been seized stood a step away, breathing somewhat quickly and adjusting a veil over her face.

Nan had found the Unknown.

"They'll be comin' red hot in less'n two shakes," said Nan. "Ther shots'll stir 'em up an' thet Mexican'll be ap' ter bring back er gang. We mus' git."

"In here!" exclaimed the Unknown, catching her by the arm and motioning toward the open door of the hotel.

Together they dived in at the door and disappeared.

"Follow me," whispered the veiled female.

Nan did so. The pistol-shots and cries had startled the people within the hotel somewhat, but such things occurred so often in Goodenough that no one appeared alarmed or greatly excited. Together they reached the stairs, and again Nan was asked to follow. A single instant she hesitated, then ran lightly and silently upward close behind her veiled companion.

The woman paused a moment to unlock a door, then gently pushed Nan into a room before her. The door was closed and locked, then the Unknown said:

"We are quite safe. They will never connect us with that lit le encounter unless the wounded wretch puts them on the right scent, and I should not be surprised if he is too far gone for so much as that."

She did not appear at all nervous or excited for a woman who had just experienced such a startling adventure and had so narrowly escaped an unknown danger.

But Nan was not thinking of that.

"W'at er voice!" was the thought that flashed through her brain. "I wonder ef she's ez pretty ez her voice."

The woman soon struck a match and lighted a candle, which gave out a dim, uncertain light. "They did condescend to give me a chair," she laughed, pushing it toward the girl. Sit down."

But Nan shook her head.

"I don't keer ter, thankee."

"Oh, I wish you would!" with surprise and disappointment.

"I don't keer to," repeated the girl, her voice growing somewhat harsh and repellent.

"Well, I cannot force you to and be polite."

"You hev no need to be perlite ter me; I don't know northin' 'bout perliteness."

"Well, of one thing I am sure—you know something about braveness. But for that, you and I would not be here at this moment."

Nan was silent. She cast a glance around the bare room, imperfectly lighted by the flaring candle. She saw a bed and four board walls, against which hung a small amount of clothes.

"I want to thank you for your bold and noble act," said the Unknown.

"I don't want yer thanks!" cried Nan, with a sudden burst of passion.

The woman in black started back a step in amazement.

"No, I don't want yer thanks," repeated Nan, struggling to speak calmly. "All I ask is ter see ther face behind thet veil."

The woman put up her hand. Nan thought it was to remove the veil, and she bent forward eagerly. Only to give a gasp of disappointment as she saw the movement was to make sure the gauzy covering was secure.

"My face!" stammered the Unknown. "Why do you wish to see my face?"

"I hev my reasons."

"But it is impossible—I cannot comply with your wish."

"Ye don't durst!" hissed Nan.

The mysterious woman made a sharp gesture.

"You do not know how much you ask!"

"Don't I? I reckon it must be a heap arter w'at I've jest done fer ye," with bitter scorn.

"I know what you did, and I am truly grateful. I hope you will believe me when I say I am grateful; but I cannot remove this veil."

"You mean thet ye won't."

"Why will you put it so?"

"Beca'se thet's right. W'at do I keer fer yer thanks! I wish you wuz dead!"

The veiled mystery gave another start.

"Are you mad?" she gasped.

"I dunno, p'raps I be. Anyhow, I hate you wuss'n p'isen!"

"Hate me? Then why did you save me from those ruffians?"

"Don't ask me—I dunno! I hated ye then—I hate ye now! I c'u'd strangle ye with a will!"

She threw one hand, hooked like a claw, above her head, and bent forward with her other hand clinched against her breast. Her black eyes gleamed; her words came hissing through her teeth. She looked the very image of passionate hate.

The veiled woman's hand sought the folds of her dress. Nan saw the gesture and broke into a sneering laugh.

"Ye won't need it," she said. "Let ther weapon alone. Besides—look hyer!"

Like a flash, quick as thought, the wild girl jerked out a weapon and thrust it forward till the muzzle almost touched the Unknown's veil.

"Ef I'd wanted ter," said Nan, deliberately, "I c'u'd 'a' killed ye 'fore this, but I don't want yer blood on my han's. I might force ye ter take off thet veil, but I hain't goin' ter, had ez I want ter see yer face."

With this she restored the revolver to its holster.

The veiled woman seemed somewhat dazed.

"Ye see," the girl went on, "ye hain't got no cause ter be skeered o' me now. I sha'n't force ye to take off thet veil, though I'd like ter see ther kind o' face as he fell in love with."

"He—whom do you mean?"

"Ther man thet ye are hidin' from hyer with yer face kivered by er veil. I reckon you know who that is."

"Can it be you are really deranged?"

"It's no use fer ye ter talk thet way, fer ye know w'at I mean. He is hyer in thish yere town huntin' fer ye. W'at did ye do thet ye ye had ter run away from him?"

"You talk in riddles."

"Bah! thet's ther way you git rid o' answerin' my question. An' you're er lady—er fine lady! I reckon ther face under thet veil is soft an' white. You've got an' eddycashun I s'pose, an' he thought you wuz suthin' fine. But with all yer baby face, yer white han's, yer eddycashun, yer lady's manners—with 'em all ye didn't meck him happy."

She cast a tragic shadow on the board partition—a black, swaying, gesticulating figure that seemed moved by bitter passion alone.

The veiled woman put out a hand.

"Stop!" she said firmly. "You have said enough! I am under deep obligations to you, but I can hear no more of this wild talk. I will not pretend to know what you mean. I have a secret, but it is not known to you. You are no judge of my acts. God alone can judge them rightly."

Nan was silent for a few moments, then she broke into a low hard laugh.

"God!" she cried. "I reckon he don't bother hisself 'bout us critters. He don't make fine ladies out o' some an' let others be igner'nt. Sometimes w'en I think it over I cal'late as how thar can't be no God. It don't seem he'd let things go ez they do."

The Unknown was about to speak, when Nan stopped her.

"I don't want ter hear no more. Ef ye talk I'll git riled erg'in, an' w'en I'm riled, I'm er hard case. I reckon I'd best go now, but I want ter advise ye ter keep cl'ar o' me arter this, thet's all."

A moment later the woman of mystery was alone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DOUBT.

APACHE NAN descended the stairs. In the hotel below she found a small crowd gathered.

"W'at's ther matter?" she asked of the man nearest her.

"Galoot run up bunt ag'in' er hard lead bullet," was the reply. "Bullet wuz too much fer him."

"W'en did it took place?"

"Jest erbout two bits ergo."

"Whar?"

"Out back of thish yere shanty somewhar."

Nan pressed forward to get a look at the wounded man. She felt an interest to know how badly he was hurt, for she knew it was her bullet that had dropped him.

The wounded wretch was stretched on his back on the floor, and a man known in the camp as "Doc Benzine" was examining his injuries. The doctor had once been a successful practitioner in the States, but a love of drink had wrought his ruin. No one in Goodenough knew his true name, but his ability to absorb vile liquors had won for him the peculiar *nom de guerre* which he bore.

The wounded man's face was a yellowish-white and his restless eyes and continual moaning told he was suffering. His countenance was of the ruffianly hang-dog cast.

"You're hard hit, my man," declared Doc Benzine, speaking with a thickness that told he was well under the influence of liquor at that moment; "but I think you will pull through all right. You want to shut your teeth and keep a break on them, for I am going after that bullet now."

The speaker held a shining instrument in his hand; the wounded man had been stripped to the waist.

"Go light, Doc, fer God's sake!" he entreated.

A moment later there was a scream of pain.

"This is the little devil," laughed the doctor, holding a small substance between his thumb and forefinger.

Apache Nan felt some one touch her on the shoulder.

"Don't ye reckon ye'd best come erway now, leetle one?"

It was Old Jim's voice.

"Hello, Daddy," said Nan. "So you're yer?"

"Yep. Heard thar wuz er funeral, but it turns out thar hain't hafe o' thet."

"Ever see ther galoot afore?"

"Yep."

"W'en?"

"Ter-day."

"Whar?"

Jim drew her aside where they were not in danger of being overheard.

"I heard thet galoot along with Black Rolf an' er derned Greaser talkin' 'bout doin' some kind o' er job ter-nite. They wuz down ther trail cluss by ther split bowlder w'en I heard 'em."

"Waal, I reckon ther job hes fell through."

Jim nodded and chuckled.

"Thet's jest w'at's ther matter with ole-fashioned Hannah," he grinned.

"Did he say who shot him?"

"Said he didn't know, wuz goin' erlong peaceable like w'en er critter jumped up an' let him have, then run like ole blazes wuz arter him."

Nan laughed.

"He lies," she declared.

"I reckon thet's so fast ernough, an' I'd like ter know who did salt him."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yep."

"Who wuz it?"

"Me."

Jim fell back a step and stared at her in amazement. For several seconds he was too astounded to speak, but he finally gasped:

"You don't mean it?"

"Waal, I jest do."

"How in blazes—"

"Come out an' I'll tell ye."

Together they turned to leave the building. At the door they came face to face with the Lucky Pards just entering from the street. Nan gave a great start of amazement, and stared hard at Dandy Duce, but the little sport did not appear to notice her at all.

As the Pards passed into the room where the wounded man lay, Nan caught Old Jim savagely by the shoulder and pointed at the two velvet-attired figures with her free hand.

"Look thar, Daddy!" she commanded.

"Ther Pards—w'at of it?"

"You saw 'em come in from ther street?"

"I hain't blind."

"Did ye see me w'en I went into thet room?"

"Yep."

"How long ergo wuz it?"

"Less'n five minutes."

"Then, Daddy, you're 'way off 'bout Dandy Duce."

"W'at mecks ye think so?"

"Come out an' I'll tell ye."

They went out together, the old man filled with wonder. A short distance from the hotel they halted.

"I'm jest er dite knocked out," Jim confessed.

"It git's me w'at ye mean by sayin' you wuz ther one as pumped ther lead ter ther critter back thar."

"I wuzn't lyin', Daddy. Did you ever know me ter shoot 'thout I hed er good cause?"

"Never."

"Waal, I hed good reasons fer perferatin' thet man back thar. He an' ernother critter o',

his sort hed jumped on er woman w'en I mixed in."

"Roun' back o' ther hotel?"

"Yep. Reckon they wuz layin' fer her at ther door. I happened 'long thet way jest ez she kem out, an' I saw 'em grab her. She didn't hev chance ter guv much o' er yelp, fer they wuz lookin' out fer thet, but afore they knew it I wuz thar."

Old Jim laughed and slapped his thigh with sa. isfaction.

"Jest like ye!" he declared. "Ye'r allus doin' of suthin' like thet. He! he! he! Cust ef I ever saw 'nother sech er gal!"

"I didn't spend no time foolin'—"

"I'll bet ye didn't!" chuckled Jim.

"But I jest let one galoot take it," she went on. "He drapped. T'other wuz er Greaser—"

"Same gang," nodded the scout.

"And he ripped off suthin' in Spanish 'bout ther devil, then he run ez ef ther critter hed named wuz arther him."

"Oh-ho! ho! he! he!" and the old fellow was convulsed with delight. "Don't I wish I'd b'in thar ter see it! W'at'er gal! w'at'er gal! Did ye let ther dad-blamed Greaser git off?"

"Yes; I jest sent er bullet whistlin' arther him ter stir him erlong an' let it go at thet."

"Too bad," with a sad shake of his head.

"Wish I'd b'in thar ter tapped him. Reckon thet wuz 'ther job they wuz plannin' ter-day; but their plans kinder misskerried."

"You bet!"

"Who wuz ther woman?"

"Ther one as wears ther vail."

"W'at?"

"Thet's who it wuz."

"An' you saved her from ther toughs?"

"Yep. We knowed ther shootin' 'u'd wake somebody, so we skooted in at ther back door o' ther hotel an' slid up ther stairs ter her room."

"Go erhead!" cried Jim, excitedly.

"Wai, I wanted ter see her face, but she wuzn't fer showin' of it. Reckon I got putty hot. I felt like chokin' of her, but I got out an' left her thar, even arther I bed her in front o' my gun onc't. I c'u'd 'a' made her tek orf ther vail, but somehow I didn't. I left her up thar."

"W'at'er gal!" the old man repeated once more.

"Now, Daddy, I've got er puzzler fer ye. W'en I kem down stairs I went straight inter ther room whar you saw me, an' I want ye ter 'member I left ther vailed woman in her room."

"Waal?"

"You know just how long I wuz in thar, an' you said it wuz less'n five minutes. W'en we kem out tergether we met ther Lucky Pards jest comin' in at ther door—comin' in frum ther street."

Of a sudden he understood what she was coming to, but he waited without speaking till she continued.

"Now ef that vailed woman is Dandy Duce how in time did she git her riggin' changed an' git out on ther street in sech er short time?"

"That was a poser."

"Blamed ef I know," the old man confessed. "She must be er reg'ler lightnin' change critter."

"Did she do it?"

"It don't look like she c'u'd," he confessed, somewhat reluctantly.

"Don't you begin ter think p'raps you're on ther wrong trail, Daddy?"

"I dunno w'at ter think."

"Rayther doubtful, hain't it?"

"I'll be jumfizzled ef it ain't!"

"Reckon ye'll hev ter guv it up."

He shook his head.

"I hain't goin ter guv it up tell I'm sart'in I'm wrong, but I will acknowledge thet ye've kinder shuck my faith. P'raps ther vailed woman hain't Dandy, but hanged ef I don't believe Dandy's er female jest ther same."

"You may hev ter guv thet up too, fer ef it wuz soo, others w'u'd 'a' notissed it 'sides you."

"You've got mighty keen eyes, leetle one, an' you'd best look ther sport over an' see w'at ye think."

"I will ther next chance I hev, but I hain't goin' back ter ther hotel now, fer I don't keer ter see thet galoot w'at I drilled no more ter-night."

"Waal, then I'll go back an' keep an eye on ther Pards."

With a few more words, they separated. Old Jim walked slowly back to the hotel, being in a more doubtful frame of mind than he cared to acknowledge even to Nan.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CLASH OF STEEL.

THE old Indian-fighter did not find the Lucky Pards at the hotel. They were gone and no one seemed able to inform Jim whither they had vanished. He left the hotel in disappointment and turned his steps toward the Wanderer's Home.

It was yet early in the evening and, being a work-day night, the dancing had not begun in the hall of Goodenough's most famous resort. At the same time, the bar-room was rapidly

filling, and a good portion of those who came in were also filling—at the bar.

No sooner had Jim appeared than he was pounced upon by Big Fist Mose.

"Thus we meet again," proclaimed the big fellow, with a dramatic gesture. "I have searched both high and low and I didst despair of finding thee, but lo! my search is at an end—thou art come."

"Say!" exploded Jim. "I'd like ter come in in at this yere door onc't without findin' you here ready ter grab me. I'm blamed ef 'tain't gittin' monotonous!"

"Alas, alas! how hath the mighty fallen! Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy! Excuse me while I make a desperate attempt to squeeze out a few briny tears."

"I believe you're growin' fooler an' fooler. Fer time's sake let up on thet snufflin'! It makes me sick!"

"Oh, Jimmy! I see you cannot appreciate my too tender and surceptible heart. I fear perhaps my feelings are too easily touched on the quick. I must brace up."

"Do!"

"I will. But, old man, you do not know how I have missed you, and you do not dream how much you have missed. I am quite stuck on your Lucky Pards, for this day did I see one of those insignificant-appearing individuals defeat your noble Crusher in open conflict."

"Ther Crusher—hev they bin hevin' more trouble with him?"

"A little, but he is very well disposed of for the present. He was bound to have revenge on the Pards for the little affair of yesterday and a duel resulted in which Reuben's right hand was badly damaged by a pistol bullet."

"I'm derved glad o' it!" declared Jim. "It sarves him right, an' I reckon we'll hev less trouble frum him fer er w'ile, at least. Which o' ther Pards wuz it as fit him?"

"The one called Silent Sid."

At this the old man nodded with satisfaction.

"I knowed it," he said, as if speaking to himself. "It's 'most allus so. P'raps I'm clean out o' my bearin's, then erg'in p'raps I hain't."

"Of what are you speaking, dear James?"

"Oh, nuthin', nuthin'."

"Ha! look yonder! Behold the Cool Man from Frigid Bar!"

Colonel Cool was sauntering idly around the room, smoking a good cigar in his usual careless manner, appearing well satisfied with himself and all the world.

"Look at him, James!" cried the giant, in a guarded tone, flourishing one hand toward the Santa Fe sport. "There is a sight for your eagle eyes. Oh, that man, that man! He is the grandest cheese alive!"

Mose made this ridiculous assertion in the most serious manner imaginable. With renewed eagerness and excitement he went on:

"There is a smell of battle in the air, old man! There will be some very warm times around this town before another day dawns. I have looked full into the eye of yonder man who is now so cool, but in the hidden recesses of that noble eye I saw blood!"

"W'at's ther matter?" asked Jim, innocently.

"Somebody been punchin' him in ther eye?"

Big Fist favored him with a look of scorn.

"Punch him in the eye!" he echoed. "Well, I guess not! That, my dear sir, is too big a job for the best man who ever stepped foot into this yere town. Punch him in the eye! The man is not made who can do it! They may be able to punch him in the back of the head—but I almost doubt that! Ha! what is that? The entertainment is about to begin. Thither, old man, thither!"

While sauntering around the room, Colonel Cool had suddenly come face to face with Black Rolf. When the gambler attempted to pass on, pretending he did not notice the Man from Santa Fe, Cool blocked the path, saying in a smooth, purring manner:

"I beg you pause a moment, sir."

Rolf flashed a look of vindictive hate at the cool man.

"Get out of the way!" he savagely hissed.

"A very rude command," and the colonel rolled the cigar into the left corner of his mouth, cocked his head on one side in a sparrow-like fashion, and fixed his eyes on the dark-faced man in an insinuating manner. "I think I have seen you before, sir."

"Will you stand aside?"

"I am sure we have met," the cool man continued, without heeding the hot words or manner of the other in the least. "About your face there is something strangely familiar—something that awakens old-time memories within my throbbing heart—something that brings forgotten faces before my mental vision—something that stirs my very soul."

"Your soul!" sneered Rolf—"your soul is reeking with blood! Such a crimson-stained thing cannot be stirred by any emotion! I know you well."

"I presumed as much; in fact, I almost fear you know me too well. By this I do not mean your remark concerning the color of my inner man is correct, but— Well, never mind. Excuse me, but this thing must be uncomfortable."

Quick as thought, Colonel Cool caught the

gambler by the beard and gave a sharp yank. The result was surprising to the spectators, for the beard came off entirely, proving to be false, and the smooth-shaved countenance of a somewhat sinister-appearing man was exposed.

"Whoop!" bellowed Big Fist Mose. "First scalp for Colonel Cool, by chowder!"

With a fearful oath, the unmasked gamester started back a step, his hand seeking a hidden weapon; but, the false beard was dashed full into his eyes, and then he heard that same calm, hated voice say:

"Go slightly slow, Junot Delorme; when you draw I shoot. I have that valuable thing known as the drop."

The man from Gunnison found himself looking into Colonel Cool's revolver.

"Curse you!" he panted, his dark face growing gray.

A pleasant smile parted the cool man's lips and faintly revealed his snow-white teeth; but, more than one within that room had learned that when the man smiled the sweetest he was the most dangerous.

"Curses have a very bad habit of coming home to roost it is said," bowed the man with the drop. "In your case I think the saying has already proved true. You have been cursing me for years, but you are worse off to-day than when you began."

"I have spent a fortune in hunting you down."

"Quite true, and I am not down yet."

"You murdered my brothers, devil!"

"I killed them both in a fair contest. Fair? No! They first jumped on me and tried to take me at a disadvantage. I was unarmed; he had a knife. I caught his wrist—I caught his throat—I tore the knife from his hand—I left it in his heart. Do you say I murdered him?"

"Yes!"

The colonel laughed.

"You have very peculiar ideas on the subject. As for the other, you know how he followed me like a bloodhound, determined to have my life. You were with him. You know how he tried to take me foul and end the work. I struck him fairly between the eyes with my clinched hand—I used no other weapon. He held a knife. My blow knocked him down an embankment and he was found at the bottom where he had fallen on his own knife. Do you say I murdered him?"

"I say I will have your life for the act!"

"Very good; but I will not allow you to dog my steps longer. Almost a score of times you have struck at my life and have failed in your purpose. This night one of us dies, for you shall meet me like a man in deadly duel."

"What if I refuse?"

"My dear sir," bowed the cool man, "I shall, without the least hesitation, shoot you straight through the heart."

At this moment Big Fist Mose saw the Mexican, Juan Gomez, draw a revolver and take deliberate aim at Colonel Cool. Gomez was at the left of the Man from Santa Fe and a trifle behind him, but it happened he was within ten feet of the giant.

With a roar like that of a mad bull, the big man launched himself through the air, his huge fist shooting out like a battering-ram. The Mexican received the terrific blow behind the right ear. It lifted him off his feet as if he had weighed ten pounds instead of one hundred and thirty and fairly hurled him more than twice his length before he struck the floor. When he came down the dirt and sawdust flew in every direction, the revolver was flipped out of his hand and discharged harmlessly, but Gomez lay still, quivering like an animal stricken down for slaughter.

"Thus in a manner well merited doth the treacherous knave receive due punishment," proclaimed Mose. "If his dirty neck shall be discovered broken, I shall hold myself blameless. Let the band play and the fun go on."

The Mexican had been knocked senseless, but scarcely any one gave him a second look. The interest of the crowd centered on Colonel Cool and the man he had unmasked.

"Another foul attempt baffled, Junot Delorme," said the Man from Santa Fe, without removing his eyes for an instant from the face of his deadly foe. "Will you meet me now?"

"Curse you, yes!"

"Name your weapon."

"The knife. I know your skill with a revolver."

"And you fancy you are the better man with a knife. Very well; the result will show. As it is to be a weapon where there will be no danger of the spectator being accidentally injured, I trust the proprietor will allow us to settle the affair on the spot where we can have the advantage of the lights."

Uncle Jerry was on hand and expressed his willingness to break over the rules on this one occasion, for which the colonel thanked him in his politest and most sincere manner.

"I hope you will wipe him out," said the proprietor of the saloon, speaking in a low tone to the cool man, who was stripping for the struggle.

"Thank you," smiled Cool, returning the warm grasp of the other. "I must if I wish to

live. This I believe is the end of an old feud. He thinks he has me with the knife, but since the Delorme brothers started to hunt me down, I have done my best to perfect myself with every kind of weapon. An old Indian chief, who had been the victor in no less than a dozen knife duels, was my instructor with the instrument I am about to use. You shall judge if I profited by his teaching. I am really better satisfied than I would have been had Delorme chosen pistols, for chance often directs a bullet and skill if defeated when least expected. The pistol is a treacherous weapon."

The two men were soon stripped to the waist. A ring of excited spectators was formed, and they stepped into the center face to face, each grasping a glittering blade. Both men were muscular, but Colonel Cool seemed a trifle the best developed. His flesh was white and clear, and he was a wonderful picture of masculine symmetry, every part being in just proportion.

"Now," hissed Junot Delorme, "I will wipe out the red score. Your hour has come, Randolph Myers!"

The colonel showed his white teeth with one of his sweetest smiles.

"The end will show," he replied.

Then steel clashed against steel with a deadly sound!

CHAPTER XXX.

KNIFE TO KNIFE.

CLASH! the knives came together, and were held there with all the rigid force of two muscular arms, while the deadly foes looked straight into each other's eyes, one scowling blackly, the other smiling serenely.

Never did Colonel Cool look handsomer than at that moment. He had the appearance of a gladiator of old, without the stern cast of countenance which great paintings represent them as possessing. His cheeks were tinged by a bit of healthful color, his lips were touched by that winning smile, not a tremor indicated he was excited. He was calm, cool, confident.

"Heaven's bitterest blight be on you!" hissed the dark-faced man, as he glared into the twinkling eyes of the one he so intensely hated. "You will die in a minute, and death shall wipe that cursed smile from your lips!"

The sight of the man's coolness and apparent indifference in the face of such danger enraged the gambler more than a torrent of abuse could have done. It was possible the Man from Santa Fe knew this.

Delorme made a desperate effort to control his intense passion, but despite himself, a slight tremor assailed him. He did not tremble from fear, but his mad rage shook his nerves somewhat.

Forward bent the duelists, the knives still pressed firmly together. Then, as by one impulse, each powerful arm seemed to throw its owner back a step. In another instant the blades came together again, and for a few seconds the spectators witness a bit of play that caused them to hold their breath and remain motionless with an almost deathlike silence.

Like glittering bits of light the knives flashed, the movements being too swift for the eye to fully follow. There was a clashing, hissing sound—or mingling of sounds—chilling to the blood of the listener. The gambler made several skillful thrusts, each of which were cleanly parried by the smiling man before him. Just then he found all his skill impotent to accomplish his deadly design.

Again were the blades pressed together, and once more did the men pause for a moment, their eyes meeting.

A murmur ran over the throng of witnesses—a murmur of admiration. Never before had the denizens of Goodenough witnessed anything of the kind. The knife duels of the place had always been of a terribly bloody nature in which little skill with the weapon had been displayed beyond the skill to strike with remarkable accuracy at the human heart. These affairs had almost always ended with a few thrusts, often both of the parties being killed or so badly cut that there was little hope of recovery. The one who got out his blade first was usually the "best fellow."

Big Fist Mose fairly hugged Socorro Jim in his excitement and delight, while he hoarsely whispered in the old man's ear:

"For the love of Heaven, Jimmy, isn't it rich! Oh, aren't we glad we're living!"

"Shet up, ye dratted fool!" gasped the scout. "Let me alone so I kin see! I w'dn't miss that fer ten million dollars!"

Colonel Cool still smiled, and not even a quickening of the breath betrayed that he felt the effect of the struggle. The man appeared less excited or concerned than the most stoical of the spectators.

But Delorme? The man was amazed and angered more than ever. He was astonished at his failure to touch the person of his adversary with the knife—a weapon with which he was most skillful as he believed. His mad fury seemed to burn within his bosom like a red-hot iron.

"You do well!" he sneered, his beardless lips showing his heavy teeth as they curled back

from them with the word, "but I am playing with you now. When I begin in earnest—"

"You will make it more interesting, dear sir," purred the cool man, a mocking light playing over his handsome face.

"I will make it altogether too interesting for you!" was the instant retort.

"Delorme, your desire far exceeds your ability."

"You shall see, Satan seize you!"

Once more the knives flashed and clashed, the gambler pressing the fighting to the best of his ability. Once he struck straight at the colonel's throat, a cry of fierce satisfaction half-breaking from his lips. But the gleaming blade did not touch the cool man's flesh, for a swift leap carried the agile sport out of the way. At the same instant he made a circling stroke with his knife, and Delorme reeled back with an oath, a red line across his forehead.

Colonel Cool had drawn first blood.

Clash! the blades came together and seemed to cling thus for a few seconds.

"You bear my mark, Delorme."

A snarl was the response.

"I might have made it your throat as easily."

"You lie!" panted the gambler.

"The blood is running in your eyes."

"Let it run."

"I do not wish to take an advantage of you."

"I can see yet awhile."

"I will give you time to have a handkerchief bound round your head, which will stay the bleeding and leave your eyes clear."

"No!" roared the marked man. "I know your tricks. We will fight it out now. I am all right as long as I can see the road to your heart."

Then once more they went madly at it, a perfect demon of fury seeming to have taken possession of the man from Gunnison. He seemed determined to cut the cool man down at any cost. Onward he pressed, plainly holding his own life as nothing if he could but destroy the life of him whom he hated with all the deadly malignity of a passionate and sinful nature.

Again the spectators were awe-stricken and silent. Once it seemed Colonel Cool was taken foul, and a great gasp of dismay came from a score of lips. The Man from Santa Fe had unconsciously won a host of friends during his short stay in Goodenough.

But the colonel skillfully extricated himself from the perilous position, and the next moment Delorme was cut again, this time on the left shoulder, the knife doing little more than draw blood.

"Right shoulder next," laughed Cool.

"Your heart next!" was the savage retort.

"Your knife isn't long enough."

"You shall see, demon!"

"Well, you shall feel mine—and there you have it."

The blood flowing from a small cut—scarcely more than a scratch—told the Man from Santa Fe he had kept his word and marked Delorme on the right shoulder.

A choking snarl came from the gambler's throat, his eyes burned like glowing coals, bits of white foam flecked his lips. With his left hand he dashed the blood from his eyes, still pressing madly on in the terrible struggle for life. With all the energy of his strong arm he tried to beat down that guard of steel and reach the vital spot where he hoped to sheath his knife.

"Satan aid me!" he implored.

"Your master has deserted you," laughed Cool.

Then, with a suddenness that was fairly astounding, the Man from Santa Fe began to press the fighting. Like a resistless tornado he launched himself upon the baffled gambler, and Delorme was instantly forced to assume the defensive, being beaten back inch by inch.

The excitement of the spectators now became intense, for it seemed the battle was close to the close. The face of the Colorado gambler assumed an ashen shade and a haunted look settled in his eyes. He realized he had met his master.

"Say your prayers, Junot Delorme."

But the desperate wretch only burst into a torrent of profanity that was indescribable.

The smile was still on Colonel Cool's lips, but it had a set, icy look. His immovable eyes seemed to burn into Delorme's very brain, and the gambler felt he was being stealthily overpowered by an unknown, subtle influence. He sought to tear his eyes from the colonel's piercing orbs, but found he was powerless to do so. A great and nameless horror seized upon his heart and began slowly crushing it.

"Say your prayers, Junot Delorme," repeated the invincible duelist.

The beaten wretch had ceased to rave and swear. He did not repeat any prayers, but a low gasping moan came from his foam-flecked lips.

He felt that he was doomed!

Once the gambler dropped on one knee and a cry came from the crowd, every one feeling that the final moment had come. But the desperate man struggled to his feet once more and began backing slowly away before his antagonist, again dashing the blinding blood from his eyes.

Colonel Cool was playing for a certain end. The right moment came, he caught the gambler's knife upon his own, then came a twisting wrench a cry, something glittered in the air. A second later Delorme's knife stood quivering on the bar where it had fallen point first, torn from its owner's hand by wonderful power and matchless skill.

Once more the spectators uttered a cry.

With a clutch of iron, the victor seized his deadly foe by the throat with the left hand and again forced him on his knees, that shapely, sinewy right hand holding a gleaming blade poised ready for the fatal blow.

"Your last moment has arrived, Junot Delorme," smiled Colonel Cool, his voice betraying neither unusual excitement or joyous triumph. "Now you die!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

COWBOY TOM DROPS IN.

At that instant a heavy chair came whirling through the air and struck the cool man fairly upon the side of the head, staggering him against the bar and breaking his hold on Delorme. Several wild yells came from different points, followed by shots, the jingle of glasses and a partial extinction of the light.

Delorme was not slow to take advantage of the opportunity thus offered him. Springing to his feet he dived headlong into the crowd, sweeping men down or hurling them aside by his unexpected onset, making straight for the door.

Blinded and stunned though he was, Colonel Cool saw the move and called on the fleeing wretch to stop and face it out like a man.

The gambler did stop for a moment at the door, flourishing his glittering blade above his head and uttering a snarling cry of fury and defiance.

"I am not dead yet, Randolph Myers," he shouted, hoarsely. "I will live to crush the last drop of blood from your heart! You cannot escape my vengeance."

Delorme immediately dodged around the building, selecting and keeping in the deepest shadows. Panting and cursing, he hurried from the spot where he had nearly lost his life at the hands of the iron-nerved man he so madly hated.

Finally, he paused, crouching close to the darkest side of a shanty at a considerable distance from the Wanderer's Home.

"Satan toast the imp!" he softly growled. "He is a perfect terror with a knife! I thought I had him when he forced me into that fight and gave me the choice of weapons, but the devil aids his own."

He laughed harshly at his own words.

"Yes, the devil aids his own. But for that, I reckon I would be lying with his knife in my heart at this moment. Fortune favored me at the last minute, for I thought my time had come. Bullet Head Ben must have worked that game. As for Juan, I fear his neck is broken. He got a fearful swipe."

Then he fell to swearing and snarling again.

Ten minutes passed. A peculiar whistle came through the darkness.

"It's the boys," said the gambler, and he instantly answered the signal in a similar manner.

A short time later two black figures came skulking toward the cabin. Delorme whistled softly and they came directly toward him till he was able to recognize two of his tools, Juan the Mexican and Bullet Head Ben.

"Hello, Cap! are ye thar?" came hoarsely but guardedly from the latter.

"Here," was the reply.

The Mexican began to swear like a Spanish pirate.

"Carajo!" he hissed. "El diablo gringos! I am just alive, but no more can I say. That big *Americano* will I kill! Carr-r-amba!"

Delorme laughed; it was really enjoyable to have a companion in misery, and Juan's fury seemed to relieve his own feelings in a measure.

"I believe you got hit," observed the gambler.

"You should thank your lucky stars you are alive after receiving a blow from the huge fist of that giant. It is a miracle your neck was not instantly broken."

At this Juan became only the fiercer.

"Come, come!" laughed Bullet Head Ben; "let up on this! Some one will hear us, then Satan will be ter pay. We hed best git ter ther cabin."

"That is true," Delorme agreed. "There we can talk it all over and relieve our feelings by swearing as much as we please, if we do not lift our voices too much. Come on."

He led the way; the others followed. In a few minutes they came to a miserable shanty standing somewhat apart from its neighbors on the outskirts of the camp. A big tree stood beside the cabin and spread its branches over the roof.

"Here we are," said Delorme, then he unfastened the door and they entered one at a time, closing and fastening the door behind them.

The gambler made a light, dimly revealing the interior of the cabin, showing two rude bunks, a table and some boxes that served as chairs.

"All squat," said Bullet Head Ben, taking a seat on one of the boxes beside the table.

The Mexican sat down, and as Delorme fol-

lowed the example of his companions, he observed:

"Jack ought to be here; where is he?"

"*Santissima!*" snapped Juan. "He is shot!"

The gambler leaped to his feet.

"The deuce you say!" he almost shouted.

"I speak the truth," Juan affirmed. "He is shot—bad hit—may die."

"How in the name of Satan did it happen?"

"You sent us to watch the hotel for the veiled senorita."

"Yes, yes!"

"We did watch, and—"

"You do not mean to say *she* shot the Rus-
tler?"

"No, Senor Captain."

"Well, how was it? You are cursed slow!"

"Give me time. We were at the back door when the veiled one came out, we seized her, we—"

"Made an infernal blunder!"

"No, we were all right. We covered her mouth so she did not have a chance to make much alarm. Then we had her, when—*por dios!*—as many as six Americans came at once upon us and shot Senor Jack down."

The torrent of profanity that poured from Delorme's lips for at least a minute was appalling.

"Two of our best men used up!" he raved. "Furies on the infernal black luck! Everything seems working against us. But how did you escape, Juan?"

"*Caramba!* When I saw we were so overpowered I fled."

"As usual," sneered Bullet Head.

"*Madre de Dios!* What would you have me do—stay and be killed like a dog?"

"What became of the woman?" asked Delorme.

"That I cannot say. I released her and sprung around the corner with several bullets whistling after me."

"Were you pursued?"

"*Si, senor.*"

"But escaped easily?"

"It takes swift legs to catch Juan."

"Bet yer boots," nodded Ben, "speshually w'en Juan is skeered somew'at."

"This plays the deuce with my plans," asserted Delorme. "Oh, fiends of hades! what luck, what luck!"

"Hain't goin' ter guv it up, are ye, Cap?"

"No! I will have Randolph Myers in my power within forty-eight hours! But we must have more men. I wish I knew of two good fellows to take the places of the two we have lost."

"I know 'em," nodded he of the bullet head.

"You do?"

"Yep."

"Who are they?"

"Ole pals of mine. They helped me work ther game in the saloon as got you out of ther condemned scrape you wuz in. But fer them, I don't reckon I c'd 'a' done it. I flung ther chair; t'other boys done ther yellin' an' shootin'. They tried ter shoot out ther lights, but didn't quite make er go of it."

"Well," said the gambler, drawing a deep breath, "it is well for me you had some pals on hand to aid you. But for that, I should be dead now, for that demon meant to kill me. I saw my fate in his eyes."

"Them boys kin be trusted, Cap."

"Then they are the very ones we want."

"Are we goin' ter wo'k ther same game?"

"Yes. It will be easier to capture the young fellow and the veiled female than to try to capture Colonel Cool."

"*Carajo!* you are right," agreed the Mexican, who was skillfully rolling a cigarette. "That is one American devil!"

"Three of us will turn our attention to the tenderfoot," said Delorme. "The other two will look after the woman."

At this moment Juan held up a hand with a warning gesture.

"Hist!" he whispered. "I think I did hear something."

They all listened, but no unusual sound came to their ears.

"It was your fancy," said the gambler.

But Juan shook his head.

"I am not often deceived," was his soft reply, as he arose, drawing a stiletto. "I will see."

Like a cat he crossed the floor and undid the fastening at the door. Swiftly but silently he stole out into the darkness.

Several minutes passed, then Juan returned, looking somewhat crestfallen.

"I do not understand," he asserted, shaking his head. "It is not often I am deceived."

"But you were surely fooled this time," said the gambler. "Sit down and we will finish our plans."

Once more they gathered around the table, and for half an hour were busy plotting, speaking in more guarded tones than they had used at first. Once or twice the branches of the tree gently scraped the roof of the cabin.

At length Delorme paused and listened.

"What is it, Cap?"

"I did not know there was wind enough to stir the tree in that way."

"By Moses, thar hain't!"

"*Santissima!* a spy!"

The three plotters leaped to their feet with one accord. At that very moment a most unexpected thing occurred. First there was a sound like the breaking of a limb in the tree, then a heavy body struck the roof and came crashing through into the cabin, falling at the very feet of the astonished trio.

Before the plotters could draw a weapon, the figure of a man arose before them, holding a revolver in either hand.

It was the cowboy, Holy Terror Tom!

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SURPRISE FOR TOM.

"GOOD-evening, gents!"

The cowboy held the drop and could afford to be polite.

Delorme ground out a furious oath.

"Who are you?" he snarled.

"I'm a rooster," was the reply. "I was roosting when my perch broke and let me fall in here. I beg your pardon for making a hole in your roof, but I really think it should have been built stronger."

"Satan take your impudence! You are a spy!"

"Not by profession. I am a cowboy—a roper of the wild, untamed, long-horn—a dead shot with the guns I am now holding—a genuine holy terror on ten wheels."

"What do you mean by—"

"By coming in as I did? My dear sir, I hope you will believe me when I assure you it was an act quite unintentional. I did not think of making my appearance here till the limb broke and the roof proved insufficient to sustain my weight. Then I thought I would drop in and see you."

"What do you mean by being up there in the tree? You were playing the eavesdropper."

"Is that the right name for it? I should have called it the roof-dropper."

"The foul fiend scorch you! you shall pay dearly for this bit of work!"

"Say you so? I am afraid you will find it a hard bill to collect, for like most cowboys, I am dead broke three-thirds of the time or very nearly that. I am sure you cannot force me to settle at the present moment."

Juan Gomez made a sly movement.

"Hold right on there, you yellow Greaser!" dropped sharply from the cowboy's lips. "If you try to draw, I shall bore ye! That's business!"

A Spanish oath came hissing from Juan's lips. "As for you, my round-headed friend," and Tom fixed his eyes meaningly on the ruffian of the bullet head, "if you make an attempt to extinguish the light, I shall run a tunnel in your system. I am not a very good boy to fool with."

It began to appear so.

"You cannot hold us covered always," said Delorme.

"I do not intend to," was the reply. "This is simply a pleasant little call. I do not intend to remain with you forever."

"You may find it difficult to get away."

"I think not. Hands up!"

The plotters hesitated.

"I mean business," declared Tom, sternly. "I shall repeat the order once. If it is not obeyed, I shall begin to shoot without notice. I can finish the three of you in about the time it would take a wild steer to fetch a snort. *Hands up!*"

Three pairs were promptly elevated.

"That looks well. Now let me caution you to keep them there. If I see any signs of their coming down, down goes the owner of them."

The three rascals broke into a medley of blaspheming in English and Spanish. But Cowboy Tom only laughed at their rage.

"Fire away, my hearties!" he cried. "Your red-hot words do not scorch me, but I should think your mouths would be badly burned."

"The devil shall get your soul right soon for this!" fumed Junot Delorme.

"*Car-r-amba!*" came rolling from Juan's tongue. "*El diablo* shall have you before another day!"

"Double dern ye!" growled Bullet Head Ben. "I shall guv ye vary 'tictler' tention."

"Your kindness is almost *too* much," and the dare-devil fellow laughed. "But to be real honest with you, I am afraid it will not be very healthy for any of you if you come fooling around me. I am sometimes nervous, and shoot when least expected."

"Now a bit of advice. I am going out at the door behind me. In order to unfasten it, I shall put up one of these toys, but I can shoot in an amazing manner with the other. You understand."

He lowered the hammer of the left-hand revolver and restored it to his belt, then he began slowly backing toward the door, keeping his eyes on the plotters all the while, and his one revolver ready for use. The trio watched eagerly for a chance to get at him, but the cowboy made no slip.

Tom reached the partition, and felt behind him for the fastening of the door, which he instantly discovered. With ease he opened the door.

"Now," said he, "I must bid you good-night."

I am sorry to part with such pleasant company, but in this world such things must occur. It is said there is a world where there will never be any more parting, but I fear you gentlemen will never reach that land, and I shall be denied your charming society.

"Allow me to caution you once more. It will be exceedingly dangerous for you to follow me immediately through this door, for I shall be outside and may feel like shooting. You had better wait five minutes after I am gone. Ta, ta, pards."

With a single spring, he disappeared into the darkness.

Laughing softly to himself, the cowboy hurried swiftly from the dangerous vicinity. He had sustained no injuries in his fall through the roof, and was rather pleased with the adventure than otherwise.

"But I think I have caught their game in a measure," he muttered. "I heard enough for that. The tenderfoot they mentioned must be Ned Morgan, but who can the veiled woman be?"

This question he was unable to answer.

"I must find Ned at once and put him on his guard. As for Colonel Cool, from what I have seen and heard of him, I reckon he can take care of himself."

Of a sudden he came face to face with Apache Nan, whom he recognized despite the darkness.

"Hello!" he exclaimed.

"Hello yerself!" was her prompt retort, as she covered him with a ready revolver.

"You have the drop," laughed Tom, elevating his hands.

"Who are you?" and she peered closely into his face.

"I am the cowboy who raised the rumpus yesterday."

"Oh!"

Nan's revolver went back into its holster.

"I didn't know ye in ther dark," she said, apologetically. "Feller has ter be ready fer business."

"Bet your life. I see you are all ready."

"Wal, I usually try ter be."

"A few minutes ago I had the drop on three as hard cases as there are in Goodenough, and shortly before that I heard them plotting against the tenderfoot, Ned Morgan."

Nan started.

"What's thet?"

"They were planning to capture him and carry him somewhere to be held in captivity with a veiled woman, whom they were also planning to kidnap."

The girl was excited.

"Guv us ther bull thing!" she cried.

The cowboy related his entire adventure, faithfully repeating all of the conversation of the plotters which he had overheard.

"Their game must be blocked!" exclaimed Nan.

"Just what I said," nodded Tom. "I was searching for Ned when I came upon you here."

"You wuz goin' ter tell him?"

"Yes."

Nan bowed her head and appeared to be thinking deeply for a short time. At length, she lifted it, saying:

"I know who ther veiled woman is."

"You do?"

"Yep."

"Will you warn her?"

"I s'pose I kin, but I hed hoped I'd never see her erg'in."

"If you will, I will make sure Ned is fully prepared."

"Will ye stand by him?"

"To the last."

"Then I'll tell her. You'd best meck sure he's armed. He lost his weepins to some o' your gang."

"He shall have another set."

"Good. You're a brick, pard, an' I admire your style. Now I reckon we'd best git ter business."

Then they separated.

"She does not dream how clearly I have read her secret," muttered the cowboy, turning his steps toward the Wanderer's Home. "Morgan is a lucky dog, if he did but know it, but I am not so sure he will think so. I wish I were in his shoes, even though she is uneducated. I, myself, have no education to boast of. I shall tell him the truth."

He found Ned Morgan in the dance hall closely watching the masked dancers. Tom promptly drew him into the refreshment room, which happened to be almost empty at that moment. They sat down at a table and the cowboy began his story at once. Ned was amazed.

"I cannot understand what it means," he cried, when Tom had finished. "Why they should think they can get hold of Colonel Cool by capturing me is more than I can see through. You say Apache Nan has gone to warn the veiled woman. How does she expect to find her?"

"That I do not know."

"I am watching for the same person here, for I am sure she is not in her room at the hotel. I hope Nan may find her. That is a fine girl, Hayward, if she is a bit uncouth."

"You are right, Morgan, and you are a lucky dog, for she is dead in love with you."

"With me?"
Tom nodded.
"You must be mistaken! Why, Hayward, I have a wife! It cannot be Nan has begun to care anything for me; I only met her yesterday. The veiled woman is my wife."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SILENT SID IS AROUND.

HAYWARD was amazed.
"Your wife?" he echoed.
"Yes."
"Why, I did not dream you were married."
"Well, I am."
"But this veiled woman—who is she?"
"No one you have ever met."
"Then she is not one of the Corydon girls?"
"No."
The two young men were silent for several moments, looking each other fairly in the face.
"I do not understand it," Tom at length confessed.
"Hayward," said Ned, "I will be frank with you as far as I can. There is a cloud between us—a mystery. I do not understand it myself."
"You did not come here together?"
"No."
"Say, I'm all in the dark!"
"And I cannot help you out at present. It is an unpleasant thing for me to speak of, and I hope you will not press me."
"Of course I won't, old fellow, but—but—" "I will tell you this: It was a case of love at first sight and a hasty marriage. The world rolled merrily for a short time, then came a black mystery—a disappearance—an act— But I must stop! I cannot speak of it without becoming excited."
"Then do not. I am dumb for the present."
Ned stretched his hand across the little table, and it was warmly grasped by the cowboy.
"Believe me," said the young Easterner, "your consideration is appreciated. Some time I may be able to make it all plain to you, but not now—not now!"
"To be frank with you," laughed Tom, "your statement that you are married has given me more satisfaction than anything I have heard for a long time."
"How is that?"
"Well—well—to tell the truth," stammered the cowboy, "I am a bit taken with the wild girl they call Apache Nan."
"Ah!"
"Yes, I like her; but I knew there was no show for me—or I thought so—while you were around. She cares more for you than any one else."
"Strange! I have done nothing to make her care for me."
"I don't know as I stand the least show there, but with you out of the field, I shall try my fortune. That girl has the making of a true and noble woman in her."
"I believe you."
"Her surroundings have made her what she is at present."
"Without a doubt."
"She is rather handsome."
"That is true."
"Give her an education and fine clothes and she would be a veritable queen among women."
"Right again."
"She is a strange creature and it will be no easy task to win her—especially when she has already set her affections on another individual."
"Tom, I hope you will succeed. She must be informed in some way that I am married."
"I do not care for the task."
"I will make the truth known the first good opportunity I find."
"Are you armed?"
"No, your friends confiscated my revolver."
"Well, you are mighty liable to need a weapon before long. Here is one of mine, and I will guarantee it is a daisy. Take it in place of the one you lost. The boys will make it good to me."
Morgan accepted the revolver with an expression of thanks.
"It is a self-cocker," explained the cowboy, "and when any one runs against a bullet from that he usually feels tired of life. It holds five lives, and here are more cartridges to suit."
"I feel ready for kidnappers now."
"They will be liable to jump you when you are least expecting such a thing, so you must keep your eyes about you all the time."
"That I will."
"And when you get in a tight place, do not hesitate to shoot for business. Make it your intention to drop something every time you pull trigger. That is the best advice I can give you."
"It is good enough."
"I think it will prove so if you follow it."
With a few more words, they arose and left the room. As they entered the dance hall Ned espied Silent Sid standing near the rear door. It was plain the quiet sport was watching the young tenderfoot.
"I will see you later, Hayward," said Ned, a slight tremor of excitement in his voice.

"O. K., old man. I shall be around. I have business that may keep me from the ranch longer than I expected. You understand."

The cowboy turned toward the bar-room, and Ned at once made his way toward the spot where Silent Sid was standing. But the little sport did not wait to be approached. As soon as he saw Morgan advancing he wheeled and made his exit from the door.

Ned hurried forward and passed out into the darkness. There he halted and looked around, but could see nothing of Silent Sid, much to his disappointment.

With a low exclamation, the young man started from the door, hoping to discover a moving figure near at hand. He felt that Sid could not have gone very far in such a short time.

For ten minutes or more he searched in the immediate vicinity of the saloon, but the silent sport was not to be found.

Muttering his disappointment, Ned was about to pass round the corner of a slab shanty when he heard guarded voices speaking near at hand. He paused and listened, quickly discovering the speakers were just around the corner. For some reason, a desire to hear what they were saying seized him.

With the greatest caution he crept nearer the corner till at last he had approached as far as possible unless he ran a great risk of exposing himself to the unknown people beyond.

Listening closely, Ned discovered he could hear almost every word that passed between the two men beside the cabin.

"It's not sech er very tough job," he heard a hoarse voice declare.

"But it's putty tarnal resky jest ther same," asserted a more sibilant voice.

"Get out! You kin hev yer ch'ice—ther tenderfut ur ther gal."

"Gals hev claws sometimes."

"I said ye c'd hev yer ch'ice."

"Who's at ther bottom of this hyer job?"

"Thet don't meck no difference ter you, Ike."

"Wal, now it jest duz."

"How?"

"I want ter know whar ther rocks is comin' frum?"

"You'll git 'em frum me."

"You? You hain't got er clean hundred ter yer name!"

"I've got fifty in my pocket fer you now ef ye agree ter help us out."

"Thunder! Is thet so?"

"Bet yer boots."

"Wal, thet soun's like business."

"Course it duz."

"How 'bout Dan? Ye say ye want him?"

"Yep."

"Hev ye got fifty fer him?"

"Yep."

"Wal, now I reckon we're yer boys."

"I thought I c'd depen' on ye."

"Allus, Ben, allus whar thar's rocks."

"Whar is Dan?"

"In ther Home somewhar."

"Wal, which will ye take—ther tenderfut with me ur ther gal with ther others?"

"I sticks by you, Ben."

"Good enough! Thet bein' ther case, I'm reddy ter fork over ther fu'st fifty. You'll git ther next w'en ther job's finished. Hyer ye hev it all in one bunch an' straight ez er string, fer I saw ther boss count it over twice."

Ned heard a sound of hoarse laughter.

"Thet's ther biggest pile I've got my fins on fer er right smart bit."

"It's ernough ter induce er man ter cut er woozle, an' thar hain't ter be no woozle-cuttin' in this."

"Wal, I'm reddy fer ther tenderfut now. I wonder whar he is."

"Right here!"

With a bound, Ned sprang round the corner and covered the two ruffians with his cocked revolver, sharply adding:

"Hands up, you miserable sinners, or I'll drop you both in your tracks!"

Oaths of anger and amazement broke from the lips of the two rascals.

"Hands up, I say!" cried the young Easterner.

"Lively about it, or I shoot!"

With reluctance the ruffians elevated their hands, one of them demanding:

"W'at in thunder an' guns do you mean, pard?"

"I mean what I say every time. I have had the pleasure of listening to your very interesting conversation during the last two or three minutes, and I am onto your little game."

"W'at game?"

"You cannot play the innocent on me. Your tenderfoot may prove a hard pill to swallow."

"Cust ef it don't look thet way!" muttered one of the fellows, in dismay.

"Wal, w'at ye goin' ter do?" asked Bullet Head Ben, for he was one of the surprised rascals.

"I think I will trot you round to the Wanderer's Home and inform the people there of your little game. They will probably run you out of town or hang you to the nearest tree."

"It's derned ap' ter be ther tree," grunted the fellow called Ike, a tremor of fear in his voice.

"All ready now," came crisply from Ned's lips. "Right about face. Keep your hands up

all the time or I salt you. Now you're right, go ahead carefully."

With his revolver ready for use he kept close to their backs as they started toward the Wanderer's Home. But the desperate villains were not ready to submit so easily.

Suddenly one of the rascals pretended to stumble and fall, but as he went down he managed to throw his body back against Ned's legs, causing the young man to stumble. The second ruffian was ready for the move and instantly whirled, knocking the revolver aside just as it was discharged and grappling with Morgan.

"Now we hev him, pard!" gritted Bullet Head Ben. "Down he draps!"

But just then there came several sharp cries, the rattle of revolver-shots and the whistle of bullets all around the struggling trio.

"Cheese it, Ben!" cried Ike. "Ther gang is comin' red hot!"

Ned Morgan was suddenly released, and the would-be kidnappers took to flight.

As Ned leaped to his feet, a ray of light suddenly shot out from a window not far away, revealing the little sport, Silent Sid, standing alone with a revolver in each hand, sending a perfect rain of bullets after the defeated toughs.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NED ACCUSES THE COLONEL.

SILENT SID had taken a hand at just the right time, and his work had counted, although not one of his bullets reached a living target.

When he had quite emptied the chambers of both his revolvers, the silent sport wheeled and bounded away. Ned called to him, but Sid did not heed the cry.

"You shall not escape me again so easily!" exclaimed the young Easterner, springing in pursuit.

But the feet of the velvet dandy proved remarkably fleet and the darkness aided him. It had been later in the evening the moon would have given the pursuer some assistance; as it was, the quiet man escaped again.

When Ned realized he was eluded, he halted with an exclamation of anger and dismay.

"This business is getting altogether too thin," he muttered. "All I want is one more good opportunity and I will solve the riddle."

Once more he turned his steps toward the Wanderer's Home. Before he reached the saloon he came upon Old Socorro Jim.

"Hello!" saluted the old fellow, as they paused in the dull flow of light that came from a small window. "You look eggscited, young feller."

Ned instantly resolved to tell Jim about the kidnappers' plot and his late adventure. The scout listened with interest, nodding his head in a wise manner now and then, but making no verbal comment till the story was finished.

"And now," concluded Ned, "what do you think of it?"

"I think thar's er tarnal piece o' rotten work goin' on in thish yere town."

"That is plain; but who's at the bottom of it all?"

"You say ther cowboy said thar wuz three fellers in the cabin whar he drapped through ther ruff?"

"Yes."

"One o' 'em wuz er round-headed cuss?"

"Yes."

"I reckon it must 'a' bin Bullet Head Ben."

"One of the men whom I attempted to capture was called Ben by his comrade."

"Jest so. I reckon we kin consider thet p'int settled. As ter t'other un' as wuz called Ike, thet might 'a' bin either Ike Hawker or Ike Swett. Both are tough."

"One of the cabin plotters was a Mexican, Tom said."

"Ther same critter w'at Big Fist laid out in ther saloon, I'll resk er good bit."

"The third man, and apparently the leader, was a beardless, dark-faced individual."

"Same critter as hes bin sailin' rcun' hyer with er big black beard on his phiz, I'm sart'in. Called hisself Black Rolf, an' wuz in cahoots with Rube ther Crusher. He's ther king pin o' ther hull business."

"I do not think so."

"Why not?"

"I am inclined to think Colonel Cool is at the bottom of it all."

"Nonsense, boy!"

"Perhaps it is, but I feel differently. I fancy this Cool has good reasons for wanting me disposed of."

"But ther plotters wuz ter ketch ye so they c'd git hold o' Kunnel Cool."

"That is wind."

Old Jim shook his head.

"Not much wind erbout it, lad. Ther kunnel hes got some almighty bad enemies in thish yere place, an' he'd never be backin' Black Rolf an' Juan Gomez. Reckon you didn't see ther knife fight between Rolf an' ther kunnel?"

"No."

"Ef ye'd seen thet ye'd 'a' known they wuz desprit enemies. It wuz er fight ter ther death."

"Yet it seems neither of them was killed."

"No, but Rolf w'u'd 'a' died ef some o' his frien's hedn't chipped in, flingin' er chair erg'in' ther kunnel an' shootin' out some o' ther lights. Thet guv Rolf er chance ter slide."

"I have heard of such things being worked by friends to blind the eyes of people. It may be that the duel was all a sham."

Again the old man shook his head.

"You're mistaken, boy, ef ye think so. I am ole enough ter tell er sham frum er reality. Can't fool Ole Jim on sech like p'int."

"But it is so absurd to think my capture will have anything to do with getting possession of this Cool!"

"P'raps they depen' more on ther gal's hev'n' suthin ter do with it then they do on you."

Ned started. He felt there was some connection between his wife and the icy man who called himself Colonel Cool. Could it be Old Jim had hit upon the truth?

"I shall find Colonel Cool and have a little talk with him," he finally declared.

"Be keerful, lad," warned Jim. "Thet man is er smilin' tiger. Look out fer his claws. I reckon he won't strike ef ye let him erlone, but ye got er rubbin' his fur ther wrong way, little ef ole thunder'll be ter pay."

Together they entered the Wanderer's Home. In a few minutes Ned discovered the colonel sitting quite alone at a deal-table, calmly enjoying a fresh cigar, the object of half a hundred admiring eyes. The Man from Santa Fe appeared as calm and unconcerned as if he had not recently participated in a deadly encounter—a desperate knife duel.

"Go light with him, lad," Jim cautioned once more. "I tell ye he's er holy terror an' no mistook! I'll keep watch o' ye, an' ef ye need enny 'sistance, I'll chip in, though I reckon it'll be ez good ez signin' my death-warrant."

The young Easterner walked boldly up to the table where the famous cool man was sitting. The colonel looked up with a smile and a nod.

"I have come to speak with you," said Ned, as calmly as possible.

"Pray sit down," and Cool waved his hand toward the chair on the opposite side of the table. "My time is not so valuable just now but I can spare you a good bit of it."

Ned took the seat, fixing his eyes steadily on the face of the Man from Santa Fe, as he asked:

"How much have you paid your miserable satellites to put me out of the way?"

The colonel elevated his eyebrows a bit and looked at the young man quizzically, blowing out a delicate ring of white smoke.

"Please make your question a trifle plainer, young man."

"I should think it was plain enough. I have penetrated your little game."

"Then my little game must be much more penetrable than your talk."

"Bah! You know what I mean!"

"It would be ill-bred in me to contradict you, but I must beg you to make your meaning plainer."

"Do you deny having hired certain ruffians to kidnap me?"

"I certainly do."

Ned laughed scornfully.

"I knew you would deny it!" he cried. "A person low enough to do such a thing, would have no scruples in lying about it."

"That is very true. But let me give you a pointer. You know I am not a man easily frightened. I want to ask you candidly if you think I would stoop to hire common ruffians to do such a thing as put a man out of my path?"

"It looks that way."

"Then the appearance is very deceptive. If I have any foes I wish disposed of, I do the job myself like a man. I do not hire them kidnapped or assassinated, but I challenge them to mortal combat and meet them on equal footing face to face."

"That talk sounds very well."

"It is straight goods. I told you the truth when I said I liked you. But for that liking, you would have had to fight me before this. I have never in my life stood as much from a man without challenging him as I have received from you."

Ned was silent a few seconds, but he was not fully convinced. The colonel removed the cigar and leaned forward, speaking with apparent earnestness and sincerity:

"Young man, I am in no way connected with any scheme against you. Instead of that, I stand ready to show myself your friend in your sorest hour of trouble. There is trouble ahead for you, and when I am most wanted I will be on hand. You will yet see the day when you will consider me your greatest benefactor."

It is hard for me to believe that. Instead of convincing me, your words make me more suspicious, for I have to ask myself why you should care to befriend me. It may be that I am hardheaded in this matter, but the future will tell."

The colonel echoed:

"The future will tell."

"For the present," said Ned, arising, "I can do nothing but wait, but I promise you the chosen tools of a scoundrel will not find me unprepared when they begin their foul work."

CHAPTER XXXV.

MORE TROUBLE.

COLONEL COOL silently watched the hot-headed young Easterner walk away. There

was a strange light in the cool man's eyes, but whatever thoughts were passing in his brain were not expressed by his lips.

The Man from Santa Fe remained in an absorbed attitude so long that his cigar quite went out. He was relighting it when he heard a clear voice crying:

"Where is the craven dog who calls himself Colonel Cool? Point him out to me, and I will brand him as the coward he is!"

Without glancing up, the colonel finished lighting the cigar and carefully inspected it to make sure it was in proper burning order. Then settling himself comfortably in his seat, he looked around for the offensive speaker.

It was the quiet pard, Silent Sid!

The little sport espied the cool man and came straight toward him, followed by a crush of eager spectators who expected to witness some "sport."

Pulling leisurely at the cigar, the colonel watched them approach, his face utterly expressionless at that moment, although there was a strange twinkle in the deepest depths of his clear eyes.

On the opposite side of the table from the colonel Silent Sid halted.

"You are the very man I am looking for!" he cried, triumphantly.

"Fortune has favored you," bowed Cool.

"You are the man who refused to fight me in this saloon last night."

"The same."

"You cannot escape meeting me like a man to-night."

"If I refuse—?"

"I will shoot you where you sit, like the cowardly dog you will be!"

"You seem to be hot for war."

"I am hot for your blood!" hissed the sport, who appeared quite unlike the "Silent Pard" of the "Lucky Combination."

"I am a bit inclined to believe you are deranged," laughed Colonel Cool.

"Will you fight?"

"If you were not a little off you would not think of forcing a quarrel with me."

"Will you fight, coward?"

"Hadn't you better consider it a while longer! It is—"

With a passionate cry, Sid snatched off his hat and dashed it full into the cool man's face.

"Contemptible dog!"

The colonel tossed back the hat and arose to his feet, a calm smile on his face.

"I see there is but one way to end this matter," he said; "and that is to show you how utterly helpless you are in my hands. I do not want to kill you; you are young and have a long life before you."

"Then you will fight?" joyously.

"I will teach you a lesson."

"And I will shoot you through the heart!"

"Not to-night," laughed Cool. "I am the party challenged, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, I have the choice of weapons."

Sid confessed that this was true.

"I am not going to choose revolvers," asserted the Man from Santa Fe.

"I care not what you choose," retorted the velvet sport, "so long as you select a gentleman's weapon."

"By a gentleman's weapon you mean—what?"

"A deadly weapon—one that will take life—not the weapon of the bully and prize-fighter. You cannot ask me to meet you with bare fists."

"I would not think of such a thing," smiled Cool. "You shall have a weapon as deadly as you like."

Glancing around he saw Big Fist Mose close at hand and motioned for him to approach.

"Most noble sir," saluted the giant, as he came forward in a dignified manner, "I am on hand, like a thumb. If in any way I can be of service to your Honor, command me."

Colonel Cool spoke a few low words in the big man's ear, and with a profound salute, Mose turned and hastened away, leaving the saloon.

"The weapons will be here in a few minutes," assured the Man from Santa Fe. "While we are waiting for them it will be well to discover if the proprietor of this saloon will allow us to settle our little unpleasantness here. If we are forced to go into the street, the light will not be sufficient for us to do good work."

Uncle Jerry was close at hand, and the colonel called him aside. They spoke together earnestly for several minutes, the proprietor of the saloon seeming to object to the cool man's proposal at first; but they finally came to an agreement, Uncle Jerry laughing softly and shaking the sport's hand at the end.

"Yes, yes," he said, speaking loud enough for the interested crowd to hear. "I reckon you're right. There won't be any danger for those who are looking on, and it is sure to draw a crowd. The bar will do a good business after it is all over."

Uncle Jerry plainly had an eye to his own advantage.

Ned Morgan was a witness of all that passed, but he seemed somewhat dazed. Once or twice he attempted to approach Silent Sid, but the surging crowd kept them separated.

"By cricketyjinks!" spluttered Socorro Jim,

who was at the young man's elbow. "Hyer's ernother row! Thet thar Kunnel Cool's in 'em all ther time. Somebody's tryin' ter down him ever' little while, an' now it's one o' ther Lucky Pards—good Lawd!"

"This fight must not take place, old man!" exclaimed Ned, excitedly.

"Dunno how ye're goin' ter help it. Reckon them fellers is boun' ter hev it out. Ther leetle cuss is red-hot an' b'ilin' ter git at t'other. I did think I'd never see ther time I'd go back on ther Pards, but I must allow thet Silent Sid's bit off an' almighty big hunk this time. Ef he gits erway with Kunnel Cool he'll be ther best leetle galoot as ever stood onter two laigs—thet's all!"

"They must not fight!" repeated Ned. "I will prevent it if I have to fight Colonel Cool myself."

"He'd wipe ye out in less'n no time a tall. You jest keep cool. Hyer comes Moses!"

The giant advanced with two slender, gleaming implements in his hands and, with a profound bow, presented them to Colonel Cool. A murmur of excitement and amazement came from the spectators when they saw the weapons to be used in the duel.

Glistening rapiers!

The combat promised to be something quite out of the ordinary, for never since the founding of Goodenough had there been such a strange thing as a sword-duel within its boundaries. Fist-fights, knife-duels, pistol-duels—these were of frequent occurrence; but a sword-duel—

"Whoopee!" shouted one excited and enthusiastic fellow. "This yere will be better'n er circus, derned ef 'twon't!"

"You shall have your choice of these beauties," said Colonel Cool, turning to Silent Sid.

The little sport laughed in a strained manner.

"You think you have me foul, I see," he said. "Perhaps you fancy I will back out now I know the kind of weapons we are to use."

"I haven't a thought you would do such a thing."

"But you feel confident with these weapons—that is why you chose them. You think you can wipe me out with very little risk of losing your own life. You shall see."

"From your words I am led to presume you have handled such weapons before."

"Of that you shall judge presently."

The quiet Pard accepted the weapons, and examined them closely. They appeared to be fine blades, polished and cared for in the most careful manner. They were not clumsily made, but were as slender, keen and delicate as such weapons should be. Not a particle of difference could Sid discover in them. He finally selected one and handed the other back to the colonel.

With his usual commanding manner, Uncle Jerry formed the spectators into a large circle, and cautioned them to keep back, if they did not have a positive desire to get injured.

"Moses," said Cool, "will you kindly act as my second?"

"Nothing could give this palpitating heart greater delight!" cried the giant, smiting his broad breast with a dramatic gesture.

Silent Sid looked around and nodded to Socorro Jim, who had succeeded in forcing his way to the inner line of the circle.

"It is all form," said Sid, "but I presume it will be better to follow it out, although we have already passed over the part where the services of seconds are of the most value. Will you represent me, old man?"

"Bet yer hoofs!" nodded Old Jim, advancing with the elastic step of youth. "I'm red-dy ter stan' by Goodenough erg'in all outsiders, an' ef you down t'other galoot, I'll feel like hugein' of ye on ther spot, though I hain't got no grudge erg'in' him."

Mose grinned as he saw Old Jim in the ring.

"So it's you, is it, ye little old runt?" he laughed. "Well, we will toss to see who gives the word to commence slashing."

"Dyer think I'm er blamed idjit!" contemptuously asked the little scout. "I hain't goin' ter rassil with you, though I c'u'd throw ye, big ez ye be, ef I wuz only er few y'ars younger—cu'st ef I c'u'dn't!"

"Ho, I don't mean a snap," chuckled Mose.

"I mean toss a coin."

"Oh, thet's it? Wal, go on, then."

The toss was made, and to his delight Old Jim won.

At this point Ned Morgan succeeded in forcing his way into the ring.

"Hold on here!" he cried. "This duel must not go on!"

"Fire him out!"

"Choke him off!"

"Stop his jaw!"

"Shoot the tenderfoot!"

It was plain, by the cries that came from the crowd, the spectators were not pleased by the interruption. Uncle Jerry came promptly forward.

"Get out of the circle!" he commanded.

But Ned did not obey.

"I want a word with this person you call Silent Sid," he said, firmly.

"Keep him out of the ring!" cried Sid. "I want no word with him!"

The young Easterner was clutched by half a dozen hands and jerked back into the crowd

with more promptness and energy than ceremony.

"Go on with ther funeral!" shouted a hoarse voice.

"All reddy fer business, gents," piped Socorro Jim. "Toe ther scratch."

Both men had buttoned their coats loosely at the top, failing to remove the garments although they might hamper their movements. Colonel Cool bent his blade in a perfect circle and allowed it to spring back with a musical twang. Then the duelists advanced and stood face to face.

But Ned Morgan had not given up his hope of stopping the duel. Blind with excitement, he drew his revolver and took deliberate aim at Colonel Cook. But before he could fire, the weapon was snatched from his hands.

A cry of despair came from his lips, as he heard Socorro Jim saying:

"Reddy fer slashin', gents. Now—*slash erway!*"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

COLONEL COOL'S WONDERFUL POWER.

WITH a soft clash the blades came together, then followed the peculiar hissing sound of steel sliding against steel as the duelists spent a few seconds in "feeling."

Silent Sid's face was flushed with excitement, but he held himself well in check, his eyes ready to catch the slightest move of his adversary. No shade of pallor to tell of fear was seen upon his rather delicate and womanly features.

As usual, Colonel Cool was smiling. It seemed as if the man considered the whole thing a huge joke and was enjoying the funny side of it in his quiet way. He only made such movements as were absolutely necessary to meet and foil the strokes of the quiet pard.

The spectators had supposed the two men would fly at each other like mad, and they were therefore somewhat disappointed at the beginning of the engagement. But they were destined to see lively work before the duel terminated.

Z-z-z! z-z-z! hissed the rapiers, the light seeming to scintillate on the polished steel. For the spectators there was something terribly fascinating about the singular duel. The hissing swords appeared somewhat like two venomous serpents twisting and darting about each other, waiting for a chance to deal a fatal stroke. The thought that one of those slender yet deadly blades might be thrust clean through the body of an unfortunate man at any second was both fascinating and horrifying.

"You are no novice at this, that is plain," acknowledged the colonel, as Sid easily foiled a crafty thrust.

"You will find I have been here before," was the retort, the quiet man's voice having a hard, metallic sound.

"That will make it all the more interesting."

"I intend to make it as interesting as possible for you, sir. This is not boys' play."

"I am glad you told me, but I am beginning to fear the spectators will think so."

"They will have plenty of time to change their minds when they see me send this blade through your heart, you dastardly deceiver of innocent maidens!"

Colonel Cool laughed as if amused.

"That is a trick you are not capable of doing, my little man."

For reply Sid made his play more vigorous, and the spectators caught their breath with new interest. The swords hissed and clashed till sparks flew from their smooth surface; now and then they twanged and rung in a musical manner.

Zip! zip! they cut through the air; clash! clash! they struck together; z-z-z! z-z-z! hissing like angry serpents.

Silent Sid forced the fighting, yet Colonel Cool did not appear making great exertions to baffle the small sport. A simple turn of the cool man's wrist seemed sufficient to defeat the most deadly thrusts of his antagonist. Many of the spectators decided Colonel Cool was playing with his angry enemy.

As he saw his strokes turned aside and every purpose baffled, Silent Sid grew more savage and desperate.

"I will reach you yet!" he gritted, setting his white teeth with determination.

"You certainly seem to have that intention," smiled the Man from Santa Fe; "but I am confident you have not the ability."

"You shall discover."

It was plain Silent Sid intended to kill the cool man if possible. There was a relentless look upon his delicate features, and a merciless gleam in his eyes. Every stroke was made with deadly intent.

On the other hand, Colonel Cool only made an occasional thrust now and then, and those were plainly for the purpose of testing the quiet Pard's skill. It was possible he was looking for a good opportunity to finish Sid with a single direct stroke, but it scarcely seemed so.

After a time the colonel apparently became careless, for he lowered his sword so that his bosom seemed quite unprotected. Silent Sid was not slow in taking advantage of such an opening, and with deadly resolution he reached for Colonel Cool's heart.

Like lightning the cool man squirmed aside, up came his blade, catching that of the silent sport near the hilt, then the colonel made a peculiar twisting movement and sprung backward.

A cry broke from Silent Sid's lips as he felt the rapier torn from his hands by a power he could not resist, his wrist receiving a severe wrench.

The cry was echoed by the crowd, for they saw the sword jerked from the little sport's hand and sent whirling into the air till it thrust half its length through the canvas roof as if piercing paper. Then, as it fell, Colonel Cool caught it skillfully by the hilt, and stood smiling, half-laughing, with both rapiers in his possession.

The face of the quiet pard turned pale, but he showed not a symptom of cowardice.

"Strike!" he cried, facing the cool man proudly—"strike! You have won the battle!"

"I do not want your life," was the colonel's reply.

"You had better take it," said Sid, sincerely.

"The right is yours, and I warn you in the end it will be my life or yours."

"What—you are not satisfied?"

"Nothing but your life-blood can satisfy me!"

"You are the most unreasonable person I ever met."

"Come, come! will you end the duel?"

"It is already ended."

"Not if you spare me now, for I shall demand another trial."

"Oh, ye immortal gods!" gasped Big Fist Mose. "How I do admire a bog!"

Colonel Cool laughed.

"With a sword you are but a plaything in my hands," he asserted.

"You disarmed me by a trick! You cannot do it again!"

"Think you so? Then take your blade and do your level best. I shall play with you no more."

With a polite bow, the Man from Santa Fe extended the weapon hilt foremost toward the silent sport. For an instant Sid hesitated, then he grasped the rapier, his face flushing as he cried:

"Your own folly be on your head! I am not to blame for taking what you offer. Defend yourself!"

Like a whirlwind the little dandy threw himself at the cool man, and for a few moments the battle was simply terrific. The swords no longer hissed, but they clashed and sung in deadly music. Like shining serpents they seemed to dart and circle and twine about each other, the motions being so swift the spectators could not follow them with their eyes. The small man was making almost superhuman efforts to accomplish his deadly purpose.

The smile did not leave Colonel Cool's lips, but it seemed to become set and icy. For a short time he seemed fully occupied in keeping his furious foe at bay. Once Sid's rapier passed clean through the cool man's coat sleeve, but did not touch the arm.

But of a sudden the tide of battle shifted and Colonel Cool began to force the fighting. To the witnesses it appeared that the colonel's blade flashed and cut all around the head and body of the quiet Pard. Several times it appeared as if Silent Sid had been cut, but neither of the gleaming blades showed a stain upon their polished surface. A feeling of awe and admiration overcame the spectators as they witnessed Colonel Cool's wonderful skill.

Clash! clash! Silent Sid's guard was beaten down—his breast was exposed—he was at the mercy of his antagonist! With a merry laugh, Colonel Cool again tore the weapon from Sid's hand. Then, without touching his hand to the rapier, he whirled it round and round in a glittering circle of light at the very point of his own sword. The next instant he hurled it upon the ground at Sid's feet.

"Pick it up!" he commanded.

Like one dazed, the little sport obeyed.

"Do you still want my life?" asked the colonel.

A mechanical "yes" was the reply.

"Very well; I suppose a man may as well die one time as another. I am at your mercy if you want my life, take it."

He flung his rapier from him and folded his arms upon his breast, his eyes steadily fastened on those of the small sport. Sid uttered a low cry of triumph and leaped forward, his sword drawn back for a deadly thrust, the point of the weapon almost touching Colonel Cool's bare throat. A gasp of horror came from many a spectator.

But the fatal thrust was not made. Even in the face of such deadly danger, the smile remained unchanged on the lips of the wonderful duelist, but in the depths of his eyes gleamed something seen to the quiet Pard alone.

Like a marble statue Silent Sid stood in the position for the deadly stroke. Five—ten—twenty seconds—a minute passed—a minute that seemed an hour to many who stood staring at that dramatic tableau. Still the silent man did not move a muscle.

Those who could see plainly afterward de-

clared Sid's eyes looked like those of a dead man, fixed and immovable. His whole appearance was that of a person turned to stone. And still the colonel smiled.

Suddenly loud cries were heard on the street. At first they attracted no attention, but gradually they came nearer and sounded more distinct. Then a man dashed in at the door of the Wanderer's Home, hoarsely shouting:

"Fire! fire! Hotel Goodenough is all afire!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NOBLE MAN.

THE next moment there was a rush for the doors, the duel being forgotten in the new excitement. It almost seemed as if a panic had seized on the crowd so fierce were their struggles to reach the open air.

A fire was a new thing in Goodenough, and the place was quite unprepared to combat it properly. Its probable appearance had been given but little or no thought by the citizens of the town.

On reaching the open air, it was seen that flames were breaking from some of the lower windows of the hotel, making it evident the building was doomed.

"Ther work of some miserable devil!" cried one man, as the crowd rushed toward the hotel.

"Yes," agreed another, "it is plain it was set."

"Lynch him!"

"It's allus ketchin' afore lynchin'."

At the first alarm both Colonel Cool and Silent Sid had strangely disappeared or been swallowed up, as it were, by the surge of human beings sweeping toward the front door of the saloon. For a moment Big Fist Mose withstood the rush, looking around for the wonderful man he so sincerely admired; but the colonel was gone.

"Hey thar, Moses!" piped a shrill voice, as some one clutched the giant's brawny arm.

"Kem on for ther fire, you overgrown baby." Big Fist saw it was Old Jim, and together they pushed their way toward the door, the muscular arms of the giant clearing a passage so easily that they were soon outside.

"Methinks it is the work of a fire-bug, James," observed the big man.

"Cust ef I don't reckon ye're right, Moses! An' I'm tellin' of ye thar's suthin' more nor ther burnin' o' ther hotel intended."

"What meanest thou?"

"Satan's loose, thet's w'at I mean! Thar's more foul work nor ther burning o' one buildin' on han'."

"Perchance thou art right."

"Did ye see whar ther tenderfutas wanted ter stop ther duel went ter?"

"I did not."

"Thar's er gang as is layin' fer him, an' I'll bet er hoss ther same rotten skunks is at ther bottom o' thish yere fire."

As soon as they reached the burning building, Big Fist broke from the little scout and rushed into the hotel, ready to do all he could toward fighting the fire.

"It's not er derved bit o' use!" hoarsely shouted one brawny fellow, meeting Mose at the door.

"Every derved thing's got ter go by ther board. Best git out an' keep it from spreadin'."

"Everybody out of the building?" asked the giant.

"Dunno. Ef they hain't, they better be git- tin'."

"Thar's er young feller in thar somewhar," cried another. "I saw him go in."

That was enough for Big Fist. Into the building he plunged, regardless of his own danger so long as some one else was in peril.

The lower part of the hotel was in a vortex of flame, and the smoke was blinding and stifling. Still the giant did not hesitate. Into the midst of the smoke he plunged, holding his breath and striking straight for the stairs. At the foot of the flight he saw a man lying in a heap as if he had been stricken down, and the red glare of the flames showed him it was the tenderfoot.

The big fellow caught Morgan up as if he had been a child. Turning, he plunged back through the smoke and was out of the doomed hotel in a minute. He ran against Old Jim on the steps, the scout being on the point of rushing into the building.

"Chain up, Jimmy lad!" cried Mose. "The lost is found. I have him here."

"They said he was in thar," explained the old fellow, "so I wuz goin' in ter look fer him."

"He's limp as a rag, but better than twenty dead men, I reckon."

"Jest kerry him out hyer whar ye kin lay him down an' we'll see w'at ails him."

"It's smoke, that is all."

"P'raps not."

"Well, we will see."

Just then Apache Nan came rushing up, looking like a wild girl, her long black hair streaming unconfined upon her shoulders.

"Whar's Ned?" she cried. "Hev ye him thar? My God! he is dead!"

What a world of heartrending agony there was in that cry!

"No, he hain't dead by er long shot, leetle 'un," retorted Jim. "He's jest keeled up er bit- tle dit," getting mixed in the excitement of the moment.

"He will be all O. K. when he gets the smoke

out of his lungs. I do not think he is hurt," explained Big Fist.

"Put him down! put him down!" cried the girl. "Let's see w'at's ther matter with 'im."

They carried him through the gathering crowd and placed him on the ground where the light from the burning building enabled them to see what they were doing. Nan went down beside him and tenderly lifted his head into her lap, gazing earnestly, fearfully into his white face.

"Guv me some likker!" she cried. "Quick!"

"Here you have the desired article," and Big Fist produced a flat flask.

"I wonder whar's Doc Benzine," asked Old Jim. "Ef he wuz hyer, he'd know jest w'at ter do."

But, Nan had no thought of waiting for a drunken doctor. With trembling fingers she opened the flask and tried to force a little of the fiery liquor through Morgan's clinched teeth. In this she succeeded.

A slight shudder ran over Ned's body, followed by a low moan. At this both Mose and Jim uttered exclamations of satisfaction.

"I told you so!" cried the giant.

"Wal, he may be hurt fer all that," nodded Jim.

"I reckon not. See, he's coming out of it slick!"

Ned slowly opened his eyes and stared around in a bewildered manner. He saw Nan's face bending over him, and felt her hands softly touching his face.

"Mina!" he faintly whispered.

The girl started as if struck. The firelight fell full on her face, and he realized his mistake.

"My God!" he groaned, weakly struggling up and glaring at the burning building.

He would have fallen heavily back from loss of strength, but Nan supported him.

"W'at is it?" she asked, as he wildly waved his hands toward the fire and chokingly gasped out some unintelligible words.

"Mina!" he groaned. "She is in there! I saw her go in, and I followed. Something struck me on the head! Merciful Father! she will burn to death!"

For a single second the girl seemed turned to stone; then she lowered him back gently to the ground.

"Look out fer him, Daddy!" she cried. "I'll be back soon!"

At first Old Jim did not comprehend her intention, but when he saw her running straight toward the doomed hotel, he fairly yelled:

"Stop it, ye dratted leetle fool! Hey, Mose, ketch her fer ther love o' God! She's goin' inter ther fire!"

Big Fist started to obey, but the crowd blocked his way and baffled him for a few seconds, while Nan squirmed her way through the throng with astonishing swiftness. She reached the hotel and ran up the steps, disappearing from the astonished gaze of the gathered crowd. Close at the heels of the girl followed a man at the sight of whom a loud shout went up:

"Colonel Cool!"

The next moment a perfect flood of flame broke from the door, completely cutting off the exit from the house at this point.

"Hurro, theer!" shouted an Irishman. "Wheer's a ladther? The little gel's gone in theer, an' she'll niver coom oout oonless we gits her oout at a windy at the toop av the hoouse. Wheer's a ladther, Oi'd loike t' know noow?"

A ladder was soon brought and placed in a position to get at one of the upper windows.

Meanwhile, regardless of the heat and smoke, regardless of the dreadful danger into which she had plunged, Apache Nan groped her way through the blistering heat and choking smoke till she reached the stairs. Fortunately, her skirts did not take fire.

Up the stairs she ran, blinded by the smoke. At the very top she stumbled and fell over something lying there. That fall was a lucky one. The smoke near the floor was not so dense, and the light of the leaping flames showed her she had fallen over a human body. Then a low cry of joy broke from her lips.

It was the veiled woman!

But Nan saw her retreat by the stairs had been cut off by the fire. Below her was a swirling, roaring vortex of red flames, and each second the heat was becoming more intense. It looked as if she were doomed.

Nan did not give up hope. She thought of the windows, and, with a fierce outlay of strength, seized on the unconscious woman and lifted her from the floor. As if the veiled mystery were a bag of grain Nan threw her across her shoulder; then she started to find a window—her only hope.

In places the fire was breaking through into the upper portion of the hotel. The smoke seemed to come up through the floor, and here and there were little spouts of flame.

Nan turned toward the front of the building. As she ran along, the floor felt soft and spongy beneath her feet, telling that the fire was doing its work on the lower side. It was by the rarest good fortune it did not give way and let the would-be rescuer and the one she was trying to save into the terrible furnace below.

But she reached the front of the building in

safety, the unconscious burden still hanging limply over her shoulder. With a kick of her foot, the daring girl sent the sash and glass of a window crashing into the street. A breath of life-giving air swept in, giving her new strength and courage.

A great shout went up from the crowd below as Nan appeared at the window. She heard a dozen voices yelling something at her, but she could not understand a word. But, with a thrill of delight, she saw a ladder at that very window, while a man was coming up from below.

"Git back thar!" she shouted, her voice ringing out clear and commanding. "I'm comin' down—cl'ar ther track!"

The man slid back quickly to the ground and Nan climbed out through the window, carefully clinging to her precious burden. The fire was beginning to lick the rungs of the ladder, but she did not notice the burns which she received.

Cheer after cheer went up as Nan descended the ladder and reached the ground. With the veiled mystery in her arms, the strange, noble girl, who had dared a horrible death to save one whom she hated with all her heart, walked straight through the admiring throng and placed the veiled woman in Ned Morgan's arms.

"I saved her, Ned!" she huskily whispered—"I saved her—for you!"

He lifted the veil, a great cry breaking from his lips as he saw the white face beneath.

"Mina! Mina! I have you again—my darling!"

Then, as he covered the face of the unconscious woman with kisses, poor Ned uttered a choking sob and staggered away into the dark shadows, her heart ready to burst with a passionate pain.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TRUE HEARTS TRIUMPHANT.

THE report went round that Colonel Cool had perished in the flames. No one had seen him leave the burning building after he rushed in behind Apache Nan. Had the demon of fire put an end to the life that human hands had not been able to destroy?

But Ned Morgan heard nothing of the report. His ears were deaf to everything around him, for the one he loved with all the devotion of a manly heart lay unconscious in his arms.

"Mina, Mina!" he whispered, "open your eyes, dearest! God! I fear she is dead!"

"I reckon not," said Old Jim, who had remained by the young man's side. "Thish yere's w'at brought you roun'; it orter do ez much fer her."

He thrust the flask of liquor into Ned's hands. Ned bathed the woman's face with some of the fiery stuff, and, at Jim's suggestion, forced a little between the pale lips. Gradually the mysterious Mina showed increasing signs of returning consciousness till at length she opened her eyes and looked into the face bending over her, the bright light of the fire revealing it plainly.

"Ned!" Unconscious of his position and the people around him, he strained her to his heart. "My love!" he murmured. "We are together once again!"

There were then no questions concerning the mystery of the past, no doubts but she had ever been true to him. He had her in his arms and that was joy enough. She should never, never leave him again. With one long look deep into each other's eyes—far down into each other's very souls—their lips met.

All around them the crowd surged and shouted. Men were desperately battling with the flames, which threatened to seize upon the wooden buildings nearest the hotel. There was a chance that the whole camp would be wiped out, for the wind appeared to be rising.

But, the reunited ones scarcely realized their surroundings for a time, so absorbed were they by the joy of the moment. Ned had quite forgotten the noble girl who imperiled her life to save the woman he held in his arms.

"Ther fire's gittin' a holt on ther shanty next ther hotel on this side an' is boun' ter come this way," said a voice in Ned's ear. "Don't you people reckon ye'd best move er leetle out of ther way?"

The speaker was not Old Jim, but a stranger. The scout had disappeared, for some reason. At first, Ned did not seem inclined to move, but the man shook him by the arm as if to arouse him, saying again:

"Ther fire's boun' ter come this way. Don't ye reckon ye'd best git back some?"

Ned found he was strong enough to get upon his feet, but Mina needed assistance and he was scarcely able to render it.

"Guv us a lift hyer, pard," called the man to another who was standing near.

With the aid thus rendered Ned and Mina moved away slowly into the darkness beyond the surging throng. The man who had spoken to them seemed anxious that they should get as far from the fire as possible.

Of a sudden several dark figures appeared all around them and they were seized by strong hands.

"Silence!" hissed a voice in Ned's ear. "If you make a noise we will cut yer throat."

But, fear could not keep the young man still then. He saw the woman he loved struggling in the grasp of two ruffians, and, with a strange burst of strength, he flung his assailants aside as if they were children, Mina's cry of fear ringing in his ears.

"Back, you devils!" he shouted. "I know your purpose! Take that!"

Down before his fist went one of the wretches who had laid hold of the woman.

"Caramba!" snarled the other, taking care to keep the female between himself and the furious young man. "Strike him down, you fools!"

The order was obeyed. Down beneath a crushing blow went the young Easterner, rendered unconscious.

"Stifle that woman's cries!" ordered the sharp voice of Junot Delmore. "Work lively, lads! It may be that some one has caught the squalls. If so, we shall have a little hornets' nest about our ears in less than three minutes. Slide is the word now! Get for the horses!"

With the two captives in their power, the ruffians hurried away through the gloom, now and then casting glances over their shoulders to make sure they were not pursued.

In a short time they came to a spot where several horses were standing in charge of a man who answered their soft whistles as they approached.

"All right, boss," was his assurance. "Not a soul been prowlin' round."

"Good!" exclaimed the plotter, Delorme. "You have served me well. Here is the money which is to be equally divided among you. Remember my promise to pay you well if you put the hounds on a false scent. Now mount, lads, and we will be away."

The True Hearts sprang into the saddle. Delorme took the helpless woman in his arms while one of the others looked after Morgan. Then, with another word of parting, three men rode away, leaving three behind them to deceive the citizens of the camp when discovery of foul play was made.

The desperadoes were forced to travel a long distance to reach their retreat, for with horses they could not make the usual short cut.

Ned Morgan was aroused by feeling the cool night air rushing past his face. At first he did not understand what had happened. He felt the motion of the horses, and heard the clattering ring of iron-shod hoofs, then he realized his hands were tightly bound together and he was held astride a horse by the strong arms of a man who rode behind him.

"Mina!" he gasped, everything coming back to him with a rush.

His answer was a low moan.

"You had better keep quiet, young fellow," warned Delorme. "You are quite in our power, and we are now miles from Goodenough. It would not do you the least good to kick up a rumpus. The lady has not been harmed, on my word of honor. Neither do we intend harming you, if you behave. That is straight goods. We have captured you to carry out a little scheme against a man whom you know as Colonel Cool, and it is gospel truth that we bear neither of you the least ill-will. Now be sensible."

Ned was inclined to ask questions, but he was silenced by the assurance that he would be gagged if he persisted in talking.

In a little more than an hour three ruffians and their captives rode into the lonely pocket. A faint light gleamed from the window of the old cabin, but it suddenly vanished as if the hermit had heard the sound made by the approaching party.

As he was assisted to dismount in front of the cabin, Ned made a desperate attempt to break the cords which held his hands.

"It's not er derved bit of use, me hearty," asserted Bullet Head Ben. "I made 'em good an' stout."

Ned relinquished his effort, saying hotly:

"You shall pay dearly for this night's work, you villains!"

The proper signals were given and Crooked Cale opened the door cautiously. The captives were conducted into the old hut and the door closed behind them; then the hunchback struck a light. Juan the Mexican had been left behind to look after the horses.

The light showed that the three ruffians within the cabin had taken the precaution to conceal their faces by masks.

"Give our guests seats, old man," commanded Delorme.

Ned and Mina were permitted to sit down.

"Now," cried the young Easterner, "will you tell us the meaning of this outrage?"

Before replying the chief of the True Hearts brought out pen, ink and paper and placed them on the rough table. Then he said:

"I know you do not believe me when I say we mean you no real harm, but it is God's truth. We have no spite against you, but, through you, we hope to obtain possessions of a certain man who calls himself Colonel Cool—a man who has been known in the past by the names of Randolph Myers and Herman Bardon."

"Bah!" mocked Ned. "That is too thin! How do you think our capture will aid you?"

"I know how it will. All we ask of you is that you will each write a letter to this man and write the words I will dictate. Will you do so?"

"What if we refuse?"

"Then we shall force you to consent. You must understand how fully you are in our power. I scarcely think you would care, young man, to see this lady tortured; neither do I think she would like to witness the agony we should be forced to make you endure. There is but one way out of the scrape. That is an easy one, for I give you my word of honor—and I have some honor still—that the letter will injure you in no way. Will you write?"

The eyes of Ned and Mina met for a moment, then the young man said:

"Release my hands; we will write."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE COOL MAN'S SACRIFICE.

"TO RANDOLPH MYERS, *alias* 'HERMAN BARDON,' *alias* 'COLONEL COOL':—

"SIR:—I am writing this letter beneath the muzzle of a cocked revolver, held by the hand of Junot Delorme, who swears he will take my life by inches if I do not write. I stand in the greatest fear of him, for he has said he would send my body to you piecemeal if you do not accept the terms he will offer with this letter. If you accept, he says he will release us both—Ned Morgan being also in Delorme's power. But for you I would not be here tonight. Had I never seen you this trouble would not have come upon me. You have wrecked my life, and unless you prove your manhood by doing the only thing you can for me—accede to Delorme's demands—my blood will be on your head. I beg you think of the past and have mercy now! I sign the name I bore before I met you.

"MINA LOTHIAN."

"It is true, we are captives in the hands of this Delorme. He has carried us miles from Goodenough. What our fate shall be rests entirely with you.

EDWARD MORGAN."

"RANDOLPH MYERS:—

"In this their hour of trouble your victims cry to you for succor. They have not lied in saying I have them in my power. Unless you are ready to sacrifice your own life that they may live, their doom is sealed. Piece by piece will I send to you the body of the poor girl you so basely deceived in the past. One by one you shall look upon her fingers—the fingers you held during that midnight marriage, years ago. Then I will send you her ears, her nose, an arm! I am relentless in my purpose. She will die a horrible death, and you will be as much her murderer as I.

"But, you can save her—you can partially atone for the great wrong you did her in the past. There is but one way for you to save her. It will be worse than folly for you to raise a party and attempt her rescue. She is where all Goodenough cannot find her. Should such a thing happen that this retreat is found by a party from Goodenough, I have instructed the guard which is placed over the prisoners to kill them both without hesitation. So you see how useless it is to attempt their rescue. If you surrender yourself into my power, I give you my pledge they shall be released as well as when they fell into my hands.

"A mile and a half to the southeast of Goodenough is an unfathomable sink-hole called the Devil's Door. If you have the manhood to do your duty to the girl you deceived, come to that place alone, at midnight, to-morrow. If you do not come alone, you will find no one there to meet you, but at sunrise you shall receive one of Mina's fingers. More will follow. You know I always keep my word.

JUNOT DELORME."

When this was written Ned and Mina were conducted into the cavern back of the cabin. A heavy door had been arranged at the mouth of an alcove in the rocks. Into the alcove the captives were thrust, the door being closed and bolted behind them.

There together in the darkness the mystery of the past was made clear, for Mina confessed everything.

"I met this man who now calls himself Colonel Cool years ago when I was at school. Like most girls I was romantic—foolish. Herman Bardon—that was the name he bore then—saved me from the fangs of a fierce dog. That was our first meeting, but not our last. He was a handsome man of uncertain age and apparently possessed of unlimited wealth. He seemed to fall desperately in love with me, and I never met a more fascinating person than he proved to be. Indeed, he was too fascinating, for he soon gained perfect control of me, as it were. I now believe he mesmerized me.

"I was young and I did not dare let my folks know I had a lover, feeling sure father would promptly take me from school and place me where I would have no chance to meet Herman Bardon. The man seemed honest in his intentions, and I speak the truth when I say he never made the least attempt to take advantage of my youth and innocence. He used me like a gentleman in some things, but he deceived me in others.

"I will not make the story a long one. He asked me to marry him secretly—and I consented. We were married at midnight, then I left him to fly back to my room for fear my absence would be detected and exposure follow. From the moment we parted in the presence of an unknown minister till he walked into my presence two years after I firmly believed he died I did not meet the man who enticed me into the wicked union.

"Oh, Ned! here in the darkness I can tell you all. How bitterly I have repented that I did not tell you the truth in the first place. I did wrong—wrong! But, I loved you so—I loved you so! I was afraid you would despise me! Forgive me, Ned! forgive me!"

"My little darling, I would forgive you if you tore the very heart from my bosom! Tell me all."

Then her voice went on again, speaking softly in the darkness of the dismal cavern:

"Herman Bardon mysteriously disappeared. At first I was filled with grief, but I dared speak of my trouble only to a very intimate girl friend, and she never knew the whole truth. As time passed and I began to realize the folly of my act, I saw I had made a terrible mistake. Freed from the presence of the fascinating man, his influence over me soon passed away and bitterly I repented that foolish midnight marriage. But, I was obliged to keep my secret to myself.

"Time passed and I heard nothing of Herman Bardon. People remarked that from a wild, high-spirited, jolly girl I became a woman with remarkable suddenness—a rather sad young lady—"

"But remarkably sweet and beautiful."

"So you may have thought. I tried to find the minister who performed the secret ceremony, but he had disappeared as remarkably as had my husband. I had no proofs of the marriage and I did not know as there were any in existence.

"But, suddenly, proofs of Herman Bardon's death came into my hands. He was among the killed in a steamboat explosion on the Lower Mississippi. I raised money to hire a detective to investigate and he brought me what seemed to be positive evidence of the man's death. There seemed to be no doubt about it. I was free!

"It was some time after that we met—you and I. You know of our little romance; there is no need to repeat it. But you never knew of the struggles within my heart. I longed to tell you all—I ought to have done so. But I feared—I feared! Herman Bardon was dead—I had never been anything to him in reality—I alone knew of the past. I kept it a secret and thus made another terrible blunder.

"We were married and lived happily together for a time. Not a cloud came between us to mar our bliss, till— You remember our little trouble that day—the first. You left the house in a passion, and it almost seems you must have met Herman Bardon on the steps, for he appeared a few seconds after you left. I will not try to describe the horror of that meeting. If I had possessed a weapon I would have killed him then and there. He tried to explain, but I fled from the room and would not listen.

"When you returned I was gone. I had fled before you should learn the truth. A dozen times I was on the point of taking my own life, but refrained, resolved to have revenge on Herman Bardon before I died. I succeeded in eluding pursuit better than I expected; but my greatest fortune was in meeting my brother Bert—"

"I did not know you had a brother."

"He ran away from home when only fourteen years old and it was supposed he died in the wilds of Australia. My father was to blame—or considered himself so—for Bert's reckless act, and he could not bear to have his name mentioned. That is why you knew nothing of my brother. He did not die as supposed, but he still held hard feelings against father and would not return home. By the rarest good fortune we met and knew each other. Then I told him my whole story and he pledged himself to aid me in ending the life of the author of all my misery.

"Bert told me frankly he was a gambler. With cards he made a living. He taught me to play, and in a wonderfully short time I was his master at every game. Fortune favored me; Bert said I was lucky. He induced me to become a professional. I disguised myself as a man, and together we struck the trail of Herman Bardon.

I will not tell how we followed him from place to place, but he always vanished just as we felt he was within reach. We discovered there were others on his trail. He was a haunted man. Finally, we lost the trail. Then we came to Goodenough as the Lucky Pard. My brother, calling himself Silent Sid, stood behind my chair when I played, his eyes on the watch for Herman Bardon. The man came at last. You came also. You know what followed. I have told the whole story."

For some time there was silence between them. At length, Ned said, fiercely:

"Herman Bardon still stands between us—he must die."

"His fate will be sealed if he falls into the hands of this Junot Delorme."

"Delorme's plan to capture him is the sheerest folly. He is crazy to think Colonel Cool will give up his life for us."

"That is true. Yet I fear the man will keep his word about cutting me up and sending me in pieces to Bardon."

"Never! My hands are free; I will fight to the last gasp!"

Together they talked over the past as the hours slid slowly away. At length, when everything had been made clear, Ned explored the place in which they were confined. He had a few matches and they assisted him in a measure, but he soon saw it would be doubtful if they could escape. Still he determined to try, and with bare hands he began to work on the wall near the stout wooden door.

Food was brought and thrust in through an opening in the door. Ned asked for a light and was given a candle. They ate and drank, and when they were left alone, the young man resumed his attempt to force a passage out of the underground prison. But, he made slow progress. A part of the time he was forced to rest from exhaustion, still being weak from what he had passed through. Mina got some sleep, and twice Ned fell into a restless slumber with his head in her lap. Food and a second candle were brought.

After many hours they both fell asleep on the damp ground. They were aroused by a noise at the door and started up as a flood of light poured into the rocky prison. At first they were blinded by the light, but they heard a voice which filled them both with the greatest amazement.

Colonel Cool had come!

Becoming accustomed to the light, they saw the remarkable man a captive, guarded by three masked desperadoes. The colonel's hands were bound behind his back, but he was smiling as if it were all a farce.

"I have come to see you," he said, pleasantly. "They gave me that privilege as it was my last wish. They have promised to set you free, and I think Junot Delorme will keep his word."

"But why did you come here?" demanded Ned, in amazement.

"I received your letters."

"But you do not mean that you have given yourself into the hands of your deadly foe in order that we may be set at liberty?"

"It looks that way."

"Why should you do so?"

"To atone in a measure for the past. At heart I am not wholly bad, although it may be difficult to believe it."

Then he turned to the woman.

"Mina," he said, softly, "for your sake I have come here to my death. I knew the heartless wretch who threatened to murder you by inches. He would have kept his word with your cries for mercy ringing in his ears, and he was right in saying your blood would be on my head as well as his. When I am dead and you are happy—for there is happiness in store for you—you may possibly have a kind thought for me."

She made no response, but leaned heavily on Ned Morgan's arm.

"I have always regretted that summer of folly," pursued the man. "I lured you into a false marriage—"

"False marriage?" she almost shrieked.

"Yes, that marriage was a sham. You were never legally bound to me. The minister was no minister at all."

"Thank God!"

"I hope you will believe me," he continued, "when I say I never intended to take advantage of it. It was simply testing a strange power which I possess. It was cruel and wicked of me, and I am heartily ashamed of it now. That one act has brought me here, for had I not entangled you I would not be forced to give up my life to save yours. I disappeared suddenly, with this man Delorme and his brother after me. When I appeared at your home I came to tell you the truth, but you would not listen. All this trouble has followed, but it ends here."

He was silent a moment, then he lifted his head proudly, the old smile on his lips.

"You will be conducted to liberty now; I shall be led to my death. Good-by."

The heavy door closed and they were alone again.

An hour later, with two armed escorts hired by Junot Delorme, Ned and Mina were riding through the night toward Santa Fe, where they had been told they would find Bert Lothian, the "Silent Sid" of this story.

CHAPTER XL.

TOM'S LETTER TELLS THE END.

A YEAR passed.

As husband and wife Ned and Mina were living happy together in a pleasant home.

"My dear," said Ned one day, "I wish I knew something about Tom Hayward. I would like to know if he reformed or kept on drinking and went to the dogs."

Just then there came a ring at the door-bell.

"It is the postman!" exclaimed Mina. "Run, get the mail, Ned. It must be a letter for me."

"You are mistaken," he cried, as he returned from the door. "It is a letter for me, but who it is from I cannot see, for it was mailed at Pueblo, Colorado, according to the post-mark. The writing is not familiar."

"You can soon find out whom it is from by opening it," laughed Mina. "Don't stand there speculating over it!"

"I don't know but that will be the best way to settle it," he admitted, opening the end with his pen-knife. "Now for a look at the signature first thing. Good gracious!"

"What is it? Who is it from?"

"The very person I was speaking of—Tom Hayward, by Jove!"

Then he sat down and read the letter aloud. It ran as follows:

"PUEBLO, Col., October 17, 18—.

"MY DEAR MORGAN:—You must congratulate me—I am married! Did not send you cards at the time of the event, for we did not know your address then. Learned it since. Who did I marry? I wonder if you could guess? You know her well. Yes, it is Nan! You would be amazed if you could see her. I tell you, old man, she does not look much like the 'Apache Nan' you knew in Goodenough. She was handsome then, but she is a thousand times handsomer now. She is studying under a private tutor and is making rapid advancement—so rapid that I am quite amazed. She says she is bound to have the education of a lady—and she means it. We are very happy together."

"Perhaps you may wonder how I came to be in Pueblo. Shortly after we met in Goodenough Old Jim Crocker—Nan's daddy—and I made a fortunate discovery of a rich silver vein. Of course we did not have the capital to work it, but we were able to dispose of it for a round sum. Then we left New Mexico and came here, where we went into the real estate business under the firm name of 'Thomas Hayward & Co.,' the old man being a sort of silent partner in the concern. We have been remarkably prosperous, and now Father Jim can sit in the corner and smoke his pipe, feeling that his own future and Nan's is provided for."

"I wonder if you ever learned how that affair at Goodenough ended? The town has never amounted to anything since that fire. The placers are about petered out, and I reckon the place is doomed without a doubt."

"When it was found that you were missing along with 'Dandy Duce,' Nan came to me and insisted that there had been foul play. I had no doubt of it, for I was in possession of the plot against you, but for a time we were at a loss how to get on track of the ruffians. We lost several hours in fruitless searching, and during that time Colonel Cool vanished and left no trace behind. Another night came and Goodenough was quite aroused over the mystery, fifty men being ready to proceed against the kidnappers, but not one of the lot knowing how to proceed. It was midnight before we struck upon the plan of squeezing the truth from the wounded wretch, Rube the Crusher. In this we succeeded finely, although I must confess the Crusher was nearly killed before we were done with him, and we promised he should be quite killed if it turned out that he had lied to us."

"It was past midnight at least an hour when a large party of armed men left Goodenough for the secret retreat of the True Hearts, Nan and Old Jim being with us and the Crusher showing the way. Big Fist Mose was also with us, and although we made quick time, it seemed to him that we scarcely crawled along. He was burning to reach the den of the kidnappers, and at least a score of times he threatened the Crusher with a terrible death if we were deceived. But, Rube did not dare fool with and us, he led us straight to the hut in the lonely pocket."

"When we broke in the door of the hut we found Juan the Mexican and an old hunchback. At first they denied everything, but they had not the nerve to withstand torture. We wrung the truth from the lips of the cowardly Mexican, but at first we would not believe you had been released. When he told us of the cave and that Colonel Cool, a bound prisoner, had been in that cave with his deadly enemy, the True Heart Chief, for at least an hour, there was some excitement. Big Fist Mose was literally wild. We procured torches and rushed into the cave en masse."

"We found them in the place called the Black Chamber. The light of our smoking torches showed us two silent figures on the rocky floor. We knew what it meant. In some way Colonel Cool had burst his bonds. The chief of the True Hearts had been armed with a knife and he had used it in a fearful manner, but Colonel Cool did not release the clutch which he had fastened on the man's throat. He strangled the life from his destroyer and revenged himself with his last act. The chief's face was black and swollen, but as he bent over Cool, we saw that pleasant smile was frozen on his face, so that in death he was as handsome as in life."

"Big Fist Mose was affected more than any one else. At first he would not believe the colonel was dead, although the man had been frightfully cut by the knife. When he was convinced, he fell down on his knees beside the man whom it was plain he fairly worshiped and cried like a child. It was a touching sight."

"When we attempted to remove Colonel Cool's hands from the throat of his dead foe, it was found to be impossible. The fingers were sunk into the flesh with a death grip. If they were buried, it would be necessary to place them in one grave. We decided the death chamber should be their tomb, and when we left it, we caused an explosion to block the passage behind us. There in the black underground darkness the two men will remain as they fell till the day of dissolution."

"You may believe the True Hearts received their merited deserts."

"There, I must close now. Nan sends her regards. We hope to hear from you soon."

"Yours forever,

"TOM HAYWARD."

For several moments after finishing reading the letter Ned gazed at Mina in silence, but finally he exclaimed:

"And that was the end of that man! He was—"

"Stop!" she said, solemnly, lifting one hand. "He is dead; God alone should judge him."

THE END.

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